

*Streams  
of  
William James*

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Volume 6 • Issue 2 • Summer 2004*

William James and  
Positive Psychology  
*James O. Pawelski • Guest Editor*





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James O. Pawelski • Guest Editor

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## *William James Society Constitutional Amendment*

On May 1, 2004, the William James Society Constitution was amended, with changes originally suggested by the Executive Committee, by a vote of 33 in favor and 3 against. This represents approximately one-third of the Society's membership. The changes went into effect immediately.

The Executive Committee wants to be sure that all the members know that communications with us about any changes and the methods used to effect them are greatly appreciated and will aid in the development of even better practices in the future. Thank you for your considered participation in the evolution of the Society.

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## *William James Society Annual Meeting*

The William James Society will once again hold its annual meeting at the American Philosophical Association's Eastern Division meeting (which runs December 27-30, 2005) in Boston, MA at the Marriott Copley Place Hotel. With Society President, Charlene Seigfried, out of the country, we will break with our brief tradition of having a Presidential Address (Charlene and Bill Gavin will each give an address next year), and instead devote the time to a discussion of Harry Heft's Jamesian influenced book, *Ecological Psychology in Context* (Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum, 2001).

The meeting will be held on Thursday afternoon, December 30, 2004, from 1:30-4:30pm in the Copley Place Marriott's Boston University Room on the third floor. This is the American Philosophical Association Session #GXIII-2.

The topic for the panel is *Author Meets Critics: Heft's Ecological Psychology in Context*.

**Chair:**

Mark Moller (Denison University)

**Critics:**

Tom Burke (University of South Carolina)

Jack Sanders (Rochester Institute of Technology)

Barry Smith (University at Buffalo-State University of New York)

**Author:**

Harry Heft (Denison University)

The annual business meeting will follow, chaired by D. Micah Hester, Secretary-Treasurer of the William James Society.

For more information, contact D. Micah Hester <hesterdm@uams.edu>.

# *Philosophy and Positive Psychology*

by John Lachs

Philosophy and psychology parted company about a hundred years ago, and the separation has been costly for both disciplines. Philosophy drifted away from the realm of facts toward the shoals of the analysis of concepts and the twisted use of words. Psychology toyed with becoming a hard science and attempted to develop skills to deal with the abnormal in behavior. Both disciplines gave up interest in the complexities of human nature, philosophy suffering from abstraction and psychology from unorganized detail.

William James's *Principles of Psychology* was the last great work in which the insights of philosophy and psychology were combined. It is fitting, therefore, that the publication devoted to the study of James's work should be the one in which the two fields embrace each other again. The benefits of their collaboration are incalculable, including new light on human nature, a vastly more sophisticated moral psychology than we have ever seen and, not least, a better understanding of what sort of science psychology has the potential to become.

Pragmatists focus their efforts on the intelligent and energetic improvement of life. Their primary interest resides in enhancement, not remediation. In this, they are in complete agreement with positive psychologists, which makes it particularly appropriate for the rapprochement of the fields to start with these two vibrant movements reaching out to each other for inspiration and concrete guidance.

We can reasonably expect that from here on pragmatists and positive psychologists will make common cause in their inquiries and in promoting human happiness and the social virtues. I welcome the cooperation and eagerly anticipate its theoretical and practical results.

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# *Positive Psychology and Philosophy*

by Martin E. P. Seligman

This special issue on William James and Positive Psychology is quite gratifying to me personally. Although I have spent the last forty years as a professor of psychology, I here confess that I am a closet philosopher. Philosophy was my first intellectual love and my undergraduate major. I came within a hair of going to Oxford to become a professional philosopher, but my mentor, Robert Nozick, shooed me away by telling me that philosophy was “good preparation for doing something else.” I took Bob's gentle advice and I became an experimental psychologist, then a clinical psychologist, and then a positive psychologist. But I was always a bit a fish out of water because psychology's several conceptual confusions, its woolly reasoning, and especially its complacent ignorance of the great philosophical forbears of psychology troubled me. So to see the possibility that philosophers will take some of contemporary psychology seriously and to hope that psychologists will do the same for philosophy is gratifying.

Positive Psychology has provided fertile ground for new psychological investigations. With this new approach several philosophical puzzles arise, and without the participation of philosophers these puzzles are likely to fester into conceptual sores. Here are two salient philosophical issues that I believe Positive Psychology re-raises.

First, it resurrects the hoary “free will” issue. When psychology focused on bad events, it was easy for psychologists to see human beings as victims of their environment and ignore issues of decision, of choice, and of character. Indeed, behaviorism thrives in a world of trench warfare and stock market crashes, when one thinks only about catastrophes, setbacks, trauma, and the like. In the courtroom, lawyers routinely invoke malignant environment as an excusing condition for bad behavior. When we consider good events, however—heroism, virtuosity, wisdom, perseverance, and the like—we do not invoke a history of privilege and good genetic endowment to undercut praiseworthiness. Rather, meritorious actions, as opposed to bad actions, call upon a discourse of credit, choice, and virtue. Aristotle (following Pericles, I seem to remember) reminds us that virtuous action is not virtuous unless it is chosen. Positive Psychology rests on a bedrock of the notions of Strength and Virtue (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Without these notions, the endeavor fails. So does it follow that without free will, there can be no contradiction-free Positive Psychology?

The second obvious issue is to find a compelling theory of “happiness.” I see four different schemes that cry out for resolution. One is hedonic theory in its many variants. Hedonic theory has happiness consisting in as much positive emotion and as little negative emotion as possible. Desire theory has happiness consisting in getting what you want. My own theory (Seligman, 2003) claims

that there are three different “happy” lives: the Pleasant Life (hedonic theory), the Engaged Life (approximately eudaimonia), and the Meaningful Life. “Substantive Goods” theory claims that there is an objective list of goods that must underpin happiness: for example, education, reasonable health, and good social relations. Is there an integrative and parsimonious account of human happiness to be distilled here?

William James, famously, wrestled with these issues, and the examination of James’s thought in relation to Positive Psychology seems a good place to begin.

—*Martin E. P. Seligman is Director of the Positive Psychology Center and Fox Leadership Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. He founded positive psychology during his tenure as president of the American Psychological Association in 1998.*

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## *Introduction to William James and Positive Psychology*

*by James O. Pawelski*

I am pleased to welcome readers to a collection of essays by philosophers and psychologists exploring connections between the thought of William James and the new field of positive psychology. Readers of this publication need no introduction to William James, but they might find helpful an introduction to positive psychology. Positive psychology was launched in 1998 as one of the initiatives of Martin Seligman, who was then president of the American Psychological Association. In his presidential address to the Association that year, Seligman (1999)<sup>1</sup> argued that psychology has become fixated on the identification and treatment of psychopathology. While this is important work for psychology to carry out, he noted that

1. Seligman’s address, delivered in 1998, was published in 1999. The address is available on the web at: [www.positivepsychology.org/aparep98.htm](http://www.positivepsychology.org/aparep98.htm). Readers interested in finding out more about positive psychology may wish to explore the entire [www.positivepsychology.org](http://www.positivepsychology.org) website. In particular, they may want to read the introduction Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000) wrote for the January 2000 issue of *American Psychologist*. That issue was devoted entirely to the topic of positive psychology, and the introduction to it can be found at: [www.positivepsychology.org/apintro.htm](http://www.positivepsychology.org/apintro.htm). For book-length introductions to positive psychology, readers may refer to *Authentic Happiness* and *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*.

it leaves out of account the identification and cultivation of human strengths. For Seligman, psychology should be as much about building strengths as about repairing weaknesses. To complement mainstream psychology, he called for a positive psychology to focus on the study of well-being, positive individuals, flourishing communities, and just societies. This call has struck a chord with many psychologists, and hundreds of researchers from the United States and around the world are now working on positive psychology in one form or another.<sup>2</sup>

Eugene Taylor (2001) has argued that the historical roots of positive psychology go back much further than 1998. He argues, in fact, that William James was “America’s first positive psychologist” (Taylor 2001, p. 17). For evidence, Taylor cites James’s discussion of positive habit formation in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals*. Whether or not Taylor’s claim is correct, the essays in this issue make it clear that there are many similarities between James’s points of view and those explored by positive psychologists today.<sup>3</sup>

The first essay is by Heather E. Keith (a philosopher) and Kenneth D. Keith (a psychologist). After beginning with a succinct overview of positive psychology and its place in the history of psychology, the authors take up a fascinating analysis of explanatory style as a genuine option. Psychological research (by Seligman and others) has demonstrated one of the causes of depression to be pessimistic explanatory style (for example, identifying the causes of negative events in one’s life as permanent and pervasive). An optimistic explanatory style, it has been shown, can significantly lower the chances for depression. Keith and Keith creatively explore the choice to cultivate an optimistic explanatory style as an example of a genuine option. They also point out that James’s philosophy of habit can provide insights for the cultivation of such an explanatory style. The authors end their essay by exploring connections between positive psychology and tragedy and by asking questions about the sufficiency of quantitative instruments to measure subjective well-being.

In the second essay, William J. Gavin and I explore the relation between James’s notion of “pure experience” and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s research on “flow.” We begin with the question of how pure experience itself is to be understood. Is it a common existential event in all of our lives, or is it a metaphysical postulate? If the former, then it is hard to see how it can remain “pure”; if the latter, then it is hard to see how it is “experience” at all. As we

2. A recent conference on “The Philosophical History of Strengths and Virtues” at the University of Pennsylvania marks a significant entrance by philosophers into this field. Martin Seligman was among the psychologists who spoke at the conference; Martha Nussbaum delivered the keynote address. As the organizer of the conference, I would be happy to provide interested persons with more information.

3. For previously published articles (in addition to Taylor’s) comparing James and positive psychology, see Rathunde (2001), Pawelski (2003a), and Pawelski (2003b).

see it, the issue here is that pure experience is a concept that tries to point beyond concepts—just like, for James, language and concepts in general must point beyond themselves. We take examples from art, religion, and sport to illustrate our point here. Next, we examine Csikszentmihalyi's description of flow and consider its relation to pure experience. We understand flow to be a single experience characterized by both being and doing, by both becoming one with an activity and by having a clear sense of the goals inherent in that activity. We conclude that, while the doing associated with flow does not seem to fit with pure experience, the being associated with it does. We note the complexity of these issues and invite further work in this area.

In the third essay, Douglas R. Anderson and Richard Lally consider connections between James and flow from a very different perspective. These authors, who are both dedicated endurance sport athletes, reflect on the nature these authors reflect on the nature and value of their athletic experiences through the double lens of James's philosophy and Csikszentmihalyi's psychology. Anderson and Lally suggest that endurance sport is one powerful way of finding the strenuousness James calls for (and finds lacking at Chautauqua) in "What Makes a Life Significant." Like any means to this strenuousness, endurance sport involves risk, and the authors point out the will to believe required to begin such endeavors. The goal is the kind of growth James praises in "The Energies of Men" and "The Moral Equivalent of War" and that Csikszentmihalyi explores more fully in his writings on flow. The authors conclude that James and Csikszentmihalyi can help us see the value of something voluntarily strenuous like endurance sport for opening up new and valuable levels of human experience.

In the final essay, Grant Jewell Rich explores connections between James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* and the field of positive psychology. He notes similarities in James's interest in the peak experiences that lead to religious happiness and the focus of positive psychology on optimal psychological states. Both James and contemporary positive psychologists are interested in the scientific characterization of these states and in the ways in which they might be cultivated. After exploring similarities between James's description of mystical experience and Csikszentmihalyi's account of flow, Rich examines the various techniques by which such states might be

achieved. Passive relaxation, meditation, concentration, yoga, hypnosis, and the use of psychoactive drugs are all examples James gives, and Rich brings readers up to date on how these techniques have been studied in the years since James. Of special interest are the methods (such as the Experience Sampling Method, and brain imaging technology) that have been developed recently and that are helping positive psychologists shed light on peak states and their cultivation.

The variety of connections these authors find between James and positive psychology indicates the richness of the comparison. We offer these essays as a first exploration of the field, fully acknowledging that there is much we were not able to cover here. We hope these essays will inspire readers to take up the topic for themselves and examine connections between positive psychology and James's metaphysics, epistemology, psychology, ethics, and pedagogy. Such work will be of interest to James scholars who want to learn about contemporary developments of his thought and may well serve as a guide to positive psychology as this fledgling science comes of age.

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# *Habits of Happiness: Positive Psychology and the Philosophy of William James*

by Heather E. Keith and Kenneth D. Keith

Positive psychology is the study of positive emotions, traits, and institutions—such things as happiness, satisfaction, confidence, hope, trust, valor, integrity, and loyalty (Seligman 2002). The positive psychology movement, a fairly recent phenomenon, comes on the heels of years of psychological study of a disease model of human functioning, an approach given impetus by the needs of veterans following World War II and the subsequent founding of the National Institute of Mental Health (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000). The ensuing focus on psychological disorders resulted in a widespread failure to ask, much less answer, questions concerning personal happiness, well-being, satisfaction, and the like. In fact, according to David Myers (2000), a search of psychological research beginning at 1887 and spanning more than a century of work showed that articles on negative emotions outnumbered those on positive emotions by a 14-to-1 ratio, and treatment surpassed prevention by 7-to-1. Thus, psychologists have developed a good deal more knowledge about human response to adverse conditions than about the conditions that make life worthwhile (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000).

There have been previous efforts along these lines, perhaps most notably in the work of the humanistic psychologists of the mid-twentieth century—particularly Abraham Maslow (1968) and Carl Rogers (1951)—and in the remarkable writing of Viktor Frankl (1962/1984). But their approach was never successful in its effort to find a place in the empirical academic psychology of the time, and thus was seen by many as a psychology of human strength that lacked scientific value, encouraged unrealistically optimistic feelings, glossed over natural feelings of despair and tragedy, couched its ideas in phenomenological terms more conducive to philosophical than social scientific analysis, and went against the prevailing intellectual grain in assuming that humans can readily change their attitudes, personalities, and emotional outlook.

Contemporary researchers in positive psychology are poised to salvage the field from these pitfalls, and from self-help expectations of immediate and superficial happiness, thereby holding out the promise of a science of human strength that has much to offer philosophical understandings of individual potential, relationships, and communities. We believe that this perspective can be enhanced by exploration of the worthwhile ideas of positive psychology through the lens of the shared history of American philosophy and psychology. Specifically, we propose that William James's focus on belief in *The Will to Believe* and habit in *The Principles of Psychology* provides a useful philosophical foundation and interpretation of the role of optimism, hope, and faith, as contributors to quality

of life. Likewise, James's discussion of disposition in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* offers an important criticism to many contemporary assumptions of positive psychology. One recent writer has suggested that, were James to return to the field today, he would want to explore the role of knowledge, action, and hope as elements of coping—to study human nature as people struggle to be good at being human (Howard 1992).

## A Science of Hope

The modern effort to develop an empirical positive psychology has produced research on a variety of fronts, including, among others, happiness (Buss 2000; Myers 1992), well-being (Diener & Lucas 1999), the meaningful engagement known as "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi 1997), wisdom (Baltes & Staudinger 2000), quality of life (Keith 2001a), creativity (Simonton 2000), successful intelligence (Sternberg 1996), and optimism (Peterson 2000; Seligman 1998). The common characteristics of current work in these areas and others like them include a range of data-based investigations, an intention to prevent (rather than to reverse or correct) what is most wrong with human adjustment, and the aim of developing human strengths. In other words, positive psychology is "...about work, education, insight, love, growth, and play. And...it tries to adapt what is best in the scientific method to the unique problems that human behavior presents to those who wish to understand it in all its complexity" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000, p. 7).

For our purposes in further illustrating the nature of the positive psychology approach, we will use the construct of optimism as an exemplar. Optimism has been discussed in numerous ways. For example, Freud (1928) considered it a rather troublesome aspect of human nature; studies of cognition and language have shown that people more frequently employ positive (than negative) words, memories, and self-evaluations (Matlin & Stang 1978); the dispositional tendency of some people to expect good things has been studied as a personality trait (Peterson 2000); and optimism has been examined in the context of personal explanatory styles—how individuals habitually explain the events, particularly bad ones, that occur in their lives (Seligman 1998). This last view of optimism—as explanatory style—is the aspect we will examine in relation to James's notions of hope and the nature of positive beliefs. We do this with full awareness of the constraints on optimism (e.g., the dangers of misperceiving reality or of exerting great effort to change events beyond control) (Peterson 2000); the importance of distinguishing between realistic optimism and self-deception (Schneider 2001); and the fact that, although optimism is no doubt interrelated with other positive strengths, it is nevertheless only one facet of positive psychology.

Explanatory style is a habit of thought, believed to be learned early in life (childhood or adolescence), that becomes the characteristic way an individual accounts for bad life events (Seligman 1998). In broad terms, people who give up, become helpless, and are considered pessi-

mistic, believe the bad events occurring in their lives are permanent and pervasive (Seligman 2002). Optimists, on the other hand, see unpleasant events as temporary and specific. Thus, a student receiving a failing grade might see the circumstance as universal (“All professors are mean”) and permanent (“I never do well”) or specific (“I didn’t prepare well for this exam”) and temporary (“I can do better next time”). In addition, pessimists are more likely to internalize (blame themselves) when things go bad, and optimists more likely to externalize (blame others or external events); conversely, in explaining positive events optimists tend to internalize (credit themselves) and pessimists externalize (believe others cause good things to happen) (Seligman 1998).

Generally, people have a tendency toward positive thoughts (Diener & Lucas 1999), and they are more accurate in processing positive information, estimate positive events to be more frequent, and recall pleasant information more accurately—all aspects of the so-called Pollyanna Principle (Matlin & Gawron 1979). Although there is fairly general acceptance of the view that cognitive processes may change affective states (e.g., changes in thinking can produce changes in depression), we must remain mindful of the possibility that the relationship may, at least at times, go the other way—that emotional states may sometimes drive thinking (Diener & Lucas 1999; Seligman 2002). Nevertheless, the evidence seems clear that the patterns of thought associated with explanatory styles are correlated with emotional states and well-being, and that explanatory style (i.e., optimism or pessimism) can be powerfully shaped by early life events such as major trauma or death of a parent (Peterson 1999). Thus, to the extent that optimism is associated not only with emotional well-being, but with physical health as well (Salvoey, Rothman, Detweiler, & Steward 2000), it may be useful to consider ways to enhance optimism and to overcome pessimistic patterns of thought (Seligman 2002). Depression and pessimistic thought, after all, have been shown to influence one another reciprocally (thus producing a “downward spiral” in mood and mental health) (Fredrickson 2001), and optimistic people enjoy better health than pessimists (Peterson 1999).

This idea is not totally new; for just as modern researchers in positive psychology have embarked upon the search for techniques to allow individuals choices in their approach to explanatory style, so too did James believe that choice could play a role in determining one’s disposition toward the world (Myers 1981). We now turn our attention to the relationship between James’s perspective and the aims of positive psychology.

### Willing and Learning Optimism

Positive psychology is not the only movement in the field committed to revisiting its roots in philosophy; the journal *Educational Psychologist* devoted its entire Summer 2003 issue to primarily pragmatist philosophy as a central foundation of educational psychology. Here, Patricia A. Alexander claims:

Many classical American philosophers including, William James, John Dewey, and Charles Peirce, were as much psychologists as they were philosophers. Both James and Dewey believed that psychology was a philosophic method of inquiry that could be used to ponder theory, explore hypotheses, and compare alternatives.... Therefore, at the turn of the 20th century, philosophy was shaping education through philosophical method. (Alexander 2003, p. 130)

The philosopher John J. McDermott (2003), in his address to the Educational Psychology division of the American Psychological Association, suggests that one’s philosophical orientation—“...my own singular, personal bedding, that on which I stood, that in and through which I have my being”—is essential to psychotherapeutic inquiry. Otherwise, any counseling that “focuses on symptoms but has no access to this bedding finds itself in an ‘intake’ that at bottom is chimerical” (McDermott 2003, p. 134).

The value to psychological inquiry of the study of meaningful living and human excellence was central to philosophy long before the work of thinkers such as McDermott and James. For example, Seligman (2002) cites Aristotle’s conception of *eudaimonia* (human flourishing, the good life, or what Seligman might call “authentic happiness”) and its cultivation through virtuous behavior and character as a way of thinking about quality of life. With his contributions to early American psychology and pragmatist philosophy, however, James provides a foundation and defense of the basic structure of a science of human strength via a methodology more in keeping with contemporary psychology.

Any student of James (1870/1968) will remember the moving passage in his journals regarding free-will: “At any rate, I will assume for the present—until next year—that it is no illusion. My first act of free-will shall be to believe in free will” (James 1968, p. 7). And about his own depression James continues, “...now, I will go a step further with my will, not only act with it, but believe as well; believe in my individual reality and creative power. My belief, to be sure, can’t be optimistic—but I will posit life (the real, the good) in the self-governing *resistance* of the ego to the world” (James 1968, p. 8).

In *The Will to Believe*, James (1897) argues that one’s emotional and philosophical orientation to the world is, at least in part, a function of one’s own beliefs and habits. One’s explanatory style is something of a “speculative” question and thus “cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds” (James 1897, p. 723). That people experience what they believe to be happiness, valor, flourishing, loyalty, and other positive traits and emotions, is an empirical matter; however, the value and worth of cultivating such emotions in one’s life, James might suggest, lies in the heart. About love relationships and friendship, for example, common sense and James (1897) both tell us that a certain amount of faith in the desired result is prerequisite to taking the risks necessary to bring about that result: “The desire for a certain kind of truth here brings about that special truth’s existence...” (James 1897, p. 24). This

is true for other such desires:

Who gains promotions, boons, appointments, but the man in whose life they are seen to play the part of live hypotheses, who discounts them, sacrifices other things for their sake before they have come, and takes risks for them in advance? His faith acts on the powers above him as a claim, and creates its own verification. (James 1897, p. 24)

This, of course, assumes that human flourishing and the good life are, for most people, a live option—that one is not genetically (or as a result of very bad fortune, Aristotle might say) predisposed otherwise.<sup>1</sup> For James, a live, rather than dead, option is necessary for genuine choice; a live option is simply one that is available to us. For example, James says, belief in a certain religion will be live for some due to their cultural context, but dead to others. A genuine option is also one that is forced and momentous; not, that is, avoidable or trivial. If emotional well-being affects our mental and physical health, our actions, our core beliefs about ourselves and our world—our very lives—then, we assume, it is forced and momentous, making qualitative living and believing a genuine option. Well-being as a genuine option involves a human contribution; otherwise trying to affect it would be like trying to change the future movements of the stars, as James (1897) worries in “The Sentiment of Rationality” (p. 97).

*Eudaimonic* excellence and human strength do not come about with the snap of the fingers or the tap of a therapist’s magic wand any more than with over-medication. Positive psychology as a “will to believe” is not, as Russell might have suggested, a “will to make-believe,” or as contemporary critics claim, a self-help panacea for all human despair and suffering. The cultivation of will, according to James and his pragmatist colleagues (and Aristotle before them), is more a matter of habit and growth than it is magic.

Human beings, James (1890) believed, are “mere walking bundles of habits” (p. 127). James, with Aristotle, concluded that habits are the foundation of our lived experience—the means by which we act, Dewey suggested. These habits allow us to live and grow in a mostly coherent fashion in a world that is often precarious: “Man is born with a tendency to do more things than he has ready-made arrangements for in his nerve-centres.... If practice did not make perfect, nor habit economize the expense of nervous and muscular energy, he would therefore be in a sorry plight” (James 1890, p. 113). Habits, though useful, are, however, not open to easy revision. With Aristotle, James (1890) believed that we must take great care with the habits we cultivate, especially at an early age. Furthermore, in

learning new habits, it is essential that we act on our beliefs at every chance as:

No matter how full a reservoir of *maxims* one may possess, and no matter how good one’s *sentiments* may be, if one have not taken advantage of every concrete opportunity to *act*, one’s character may remain entirely unaffected for the better. With mere good intentions, hell is proverbially paved. (James’s emphases) (James 1890, p. 125)

“Willing” a belief without acting on it would be akin to expecting the stars to change their paths. The brain “grows to their use” only when tendencies to act are frequently repeated and practiced. An optimistic explanatory style can be cultivated, but only through the long process of developing new habits. Learning optimism is just that. In the same way that James thought belief to be imprinted by action, Seligman (1998) argues that explanatory style, whether optimistic or pessimistic, is a habit of thought.

James’s colleagues George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, and Jane Addams add that habits (of any kind) are also not merely a matter of individual growth, but are nurtured by social institutions and relationships. As James (1890) conceived of habits as “the enormous fly-wheel of society” (p. 121), Mead (1934) claimed that the self is a consequence of social interaction, and Dewey (1922/1988) noted the importance of community in developing moral habits: “To learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community...” (p. 32). Addams (1913) likewise developed a view of ethical character as evolving out of social relationships, especially of the family.

Thus, optimism, hope, and happiness are learned habits that constitute our orientation to the world. Like any habits, these are difficult to cultivate, require constant practice, and are best planted early on. Education, social interaction, interpersonal relationships, and the quality of our institutions all ground our orientation to a precarious world. Aristotle (trans. 1962) agrees: “...it is no small matter whether one habit or another is inculcated in us from early childhood; on the contrary, it makes a considerable difference, or, rather, all the difference” (1103b).

Positive psychology recognizes this with its increased focus on society and institutions. Psychologist Barbara Fredrickson (2001) suggests that individual growth, social connections, and resiliency are strengthened by positive emotions because they broaden an individual’s ability to think and act, and other investigators have studied key aspects of quality of life in such settings as families (Poston et al., 2003) and schools (Keith & Schalock, 1995). Similarly, James (1897) suggests that faith in one’s own abilities allows for greater possibility for success: “...belief is one of the indispensable preliminary conditions of the realization of its object” (p. 97). In fact, a growing body of evidence suggests an important relationship between positive emotions and connection to others, whether in marriage (Myers 1992), family (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), friends (Myers 1999), or community (Putnam 2000), and Seligman

1. In *The Varieties of Religions Experience*, James (1902) criticizes the assumption that optimism is always (or often) a live option. He writes, “To a mind attentive to this state of thing and rightly subject to the joy-destroying chill which such a contemplation engenders, the only relief that healthy-mindedness can give is by saying: ‘Stuff and nonsense, get out into the open air!’ or ‘Cheer up, old fellow, you’ll be all right ere long, if you will only drop your morbidness!’ But in all seriousness, can such bald animal talk as that be treated as a rational answer?” (pp. 139-140)

(2002) has stated that the pillars of positive psychology include not only the study of positive emotion and positive traits, but also positive institutions (e.g., democracy, family, and free inquiry) that support our strengths and virtues.

### Hope in a “Minor Key”

One’s positive experiences and interactions might lend themselves well to subjective well-being, but what about the existence of tragedy? Does positive psychology account for and consider ill fortune? James reminds us in both “The Sentiment of Rationality” (1897) and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) that sometimes there are events and dispositions beyond our control. There are folks who live their lives “set wholly in a minor key” (James 1902, p. 142) and there are “forms of evil so extreme as to enter into no good system whatsoever...” (James 1902, p. 165). To be useful to individuals and society, positive psychology must not be a whimsical, Pollyannish pseudoscience on a moral holiday from reality. To do this, it must adequately account for tragedy and the vagaries of human experience. James provides a model that binds experience to reality while at the same time acknowledging that our relationship to reality involves a human contribution. Of pessimism versus (what Seligman might call) a more simplistically optimistic view, James (1902) states:

It seems to me that we are bound to say that morbid-mindedness ranges over a wider scale of experience, and that its survey is the one that overlaps. The method of averting one’s attention from evil, and living simply in the light of good is splendid as long as it will work. (James 1902, p. 163)

But, healthy-mindedness:

...breaks down impotently as soon as melancholy comes; and even though one be quite free from melancholy one’s self, there is no doubt that healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life’s significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth. (James 1902, p. 163)

James was neither an optimist nor a pessimist—he was a meliorist who believed that with faith, hope, and optimism, and under the right circumstances, things can get better. Learning optimism (or at least meliorism) and creating the right circumstances are essential to improving quality of life. About this moral element to James’s philosophy and life, Ralph Barton Perry (1935) remarks:

He was too sensitive to ignore evil, too moral to tolerate it, and too ardent to accept it as inevitable. Optimism was as impossible for him as pessimism. No philosophy could possibly suit him that did not candidly recognize the dubi-

ous fortunes of mankind, and encourage him as a moral individual to buckle on his armor and go forth to battle. (Perry 1935, p. 324)

Although this might suggest that James would ask whether positive psychology should emphasize more the need to buckle on our armor, we would point out that positive psychology arises from a context in which clinical work has focused primarily on what James (1902) would call the “sick soul.” Additionally, positive psychology seeks, at least in popular discourse, to simplify the learning process and role of optimism. Part of Seligman’s (1998) work includes a questionnaire assessing optimistic or pessimistic tendencies in explanatory style. After answering many questions, such as “The Project you are in charge of is a great success: A. I kept a close watch over everyone’s work; B. Everyone devoted a lot of time and energy to it” (Seligman 1998, p. 33), one can assess explanatory style, and thus, whether one has a more optimistic or pessimistic orientation. Although this may be a useful therapeutic tool, James might worry that one’s disposition is far more complicated (and interesting!) than such a quiz will suggest. Objective measurement, perhaps, doesn’t lend itself entirely well to judging or encouraging subjective well-being, just as objective, tangible factors (e.g., money) do not guarantee happiness (Myers 1992; Seligman 2002)—a reality recognized by a number of contemporary positive psychology writers who have discussed the tenuous relationship between subjective reports of well-being and objective life circumstances (Keith 2001a; Schwarz & Strack 1999).

McDermott (2003) reflects this variety of criticism in his address to educational psychologists:

Literal-mindedness and the quest for objectivity in matters human constitutes the death of the soul. The distinctly personal ingredient should color all of our activities, otherwise we live in the gray of correctness, external and dead to the world and to ourselves. (McDermott 2003, p. 135)

Though this clearly supports positive psychology’s study of the subjective, it also suggests that if the methodological focus is primarily on literal measurement, it will miss the subjective altogether. Likewise, James (1890) pointed out that there is a certain vagueness and fringe element to the horizon of individual experience and the flights and perchings of subjective life. Although positive psychology measures and reinforces an optimistic orientation, perhaps it must also comprehend that, as McDermott (2003) says, “The key is not in objects, names and definitions. The key is in the relations and symbols” (p. 135). Perhaps we need both a science of human strength—and a philosophy to ground and correct it. Such an approach may be evolving in the work of writers like Sandra Schneider (2001), who makes an effort at both empirical and logical levels to articulate the connections among reality, optimism, and the potential for self-deception.

Regardless, if emotional well-being is at least somewhat under our influence, if it can be tempered by an

understanding of the real existence of tragedy, and if, as James (1897) suggests, there are some cases “where faith creates its own verification” (p. 97), then it behooves us to consider how best to actualize the potential for well-being in ourselves and others and create a social and physical environment in which habits of human excellence and happiness will flourish. As Charlene Haddock Seigfried (1990) states, for James “Experience is constituted, not passively received” (p. 76). If we don’t work toward constituting human strength, then the best we will do, according to positive psychology, is battle weakness, despair, and apathy.

### Optimism, Hope, and Meaning

To test the hypothesis that optimism (or at least meliorism) and meaningful existence can, though perhaps in a very limited sense, be learned and maintained in even the most unfortunate of contexts, we turn to psychiatrist Viktor Frankl’s (1962/1984) account of his experiences of the death camps of Nazi Germany. Though Frankl didn’t, perhaps, share the empirical focus of contemporary positive psychology, he surely would have embraced its values. In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Frankl considers whether life can be lived in a meaningful way even under utterly meaningless circumstances.

As a survivor of the death camps, Frankl vowed to spend his life attempting to help others live through tragic situations. His theory of logotherapy utilizes a “will to meaning” (Frankl 1984, p. 105)—the idea that one has future meanings to fulfill in life, and therefore life is worth living. Logotherapy is perhaps an early version of positive psychology; however, we look to Frankl here not for his psychological theory, but for his experience of small glimpses of honor, valor, nobility, empowerment, and optimism in the concentration camps.

Frankl’s account includes many stories of the horrifying conditions of the camps, the dehumanizing treatment of the prisoners, and the resulting apathy of the victims—often resulting in their own death. But Frankl and many others did survive. While this may be due, Frankl admits, to simple dumb luck (if luck is an appropriate word here—random chance, or a momentary lapse of evil might be better alternatives), his work attempts to offer an explanation for why some victims were able to survive and, eventually, flourish. Fond of quoting thinkers such as Nietzsche (“He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how* (Frankl’s emphasis)” (Frankl 1984, p. 84)) and “That which does not kill me makes me stronger” (Frankl 1984, p. 89) and Dostoevsky (“There is only one thing that I dread: not to be worthy of my sufferings” (Frankl 1984, p. 75)), Frankl claims that meaning—having something to live for—is essential to human happiness. This view is echoed in Seligman’s (2002) assertion that authentic happiness—including purpose, virtue, and integrity—is not only meaningful, but that it provides strengths that are more essential in difficult times than when life is easy. In Frankl’s case, it was his wife, his work, and the future possibility of using his experiences for some good that comprised his will to meaning. In the case of his wife, Frankl

determined that the experience of his love was so powerful that it transcended even the fact that he didn’t know whether she was alive (she wasn’t): “Had I known then that my wife was dead, I think that I would still have given myself, undisturbed by that knowledge, to the contemplation of her image, and that my mental conversation with her would have been just as vivid and just as satisfying” (Frankl 1984, p. 50).

For many others, the will to meaning was actualized through political debate, aesthetic experiences (a lone violin in the night, a sunrise seen through the bars of a cattle car), humor, and moments of caring almost unfathomable under the circumstances. These moments of caring often meant great sacrifice. As Frankl (1962/1984) reminds us, “The best of us did not return” (p. 18).

Although Frankl’s case is dramatic and thus allows a clear focus on positive traits and emotions in the face of tragedy, similar characteristics may also be found in the behavior and outlook of ordinary people in a variety of life circumstances. For example, Bob Greene (2002) has chronicled the extraordinary story of personal sacrifice and commitment of rural and small-town people, some from hundreds of miles away, who provided food, company, and friendship to thousands of troops—eventually there were six million in all—on every railway train that passed through the small station at North Platte, Nebraska, during every day of World War II for a period of nearly five years. And more recently, in our own studies of quality of life of older Americans (Keith 2001b), with an average age approaching 80 years, we have found that, despite the problems of health and infirmity many of them experience, most consider themselves better off than others; more than two-thirds say life brings out the best in them; three-fourths consider their lives very worthwhile; and most say they are not lonely. We are struck by the positive outlook, resilience, and humor they display while telling us about their lives.

James (1897) too recognized the personal contribution to finding meaning in adversity in his essay “Is Life Worth Living?” Like Frankl, James rejected the notion that meaning in life can be created outside of human experience. In answer to the question of whether life is worth living, James (1897) replied “It does, indeed, depend on you *the liver* (James’s emphasis)” (p. 61). James further argued that “It is only by risking our persons from one hour to another that we live at all. And often enough our faith beforehand in an uncertified result *is the only thing that makes the result come true* (James’s emphasis)” (James 1897, p. 59). If life is worth living, it is because we continually take the risk to keep believing it—or, perhaps, in terms familiar to positive psychology, through recognizing and disputing pessimistic thoughts (Seligman 2002). Though we might be wrong, life, says James (1897), “*is what we make it, from the moral point of view*; and we are determined to make it from that point of view, so far as we have anything to do with it, a success (James’s emphasis)” (p. 61).

Being Good at Being Human

William James did not consider himself an optimist. However, as a meliorist (or as Perry claimed, a moralist), he believed that, within the bounds of the realistic, habits of thought could change life for the better—that faith creates its own verification. Thus, James's view is consistent with the positive psychology focus on *realistic* optimism and its belief that personal explanatory style is a habit that is the product of experience and context. Further, the positive psychology movement, like James, acknowledges the role of tragedy in personal lives, but also has documented the importance of explanatory style in recovery of subjective well-being in the aftermath of devastating experiences, and the contribution of meaning to coping with such events (Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, & Gruenewald 2000).

Positive psychology and Jamesian philosophy share more than a common interest in habits of thought aimed toward better living. Both reject the reductionistic epistemological traditions of psychology and philosophy that cast a suspicious light on approaches intended to improve subjective well-being and quality of life (McDermott 2003; Sheldon & King 2001). In each case, the traditional view has distrusted work in this area due to its lack of empirical or epistemological foundation. However, recent work in positive psychology has occurred in the mainstream of scientific investigation—an approach clearly consistent with the experimental method of pragmatism.

In conclusion, we find contemporary positive psychology in concert with the philosophy of William James in its pursuit of human strengths. Thus, optimism, hope, valor, *eudaimonic* happiness, and quality of life have once again become significant themes for psychological and philosophical investigation. Being good at being human may finally be on the horizon of our understanding.

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# James's "Pure Experience" and Csikszentmihalyi's "Flow": Existential Event or Methodological Postulate?

by William J. Gavin and James O. Pawelski

William James's doctrine of pure experience is as central to his philosophy as it is difficult to understand. If it is an existential event commonly available to all of us, how can the experience remain "pure"? If it is merely a methodological postulate, how can it possibly be experienced? We begin by exploring in some detail a number of complexities involved in trying to answer these questions. Then we turn to a discussion of "flow," a mental state identified and studied by contemporary psychologists (chief among them Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi). We believe a comparison between pure experience and flow may help cast light on both states.

## The Difficulty of Teaching "Pure Experience": Pedagogical Reflections

Teachers often approach the text of *Essays in Radical Empiricism* with a certain amount of Kierkegaardian "fear and trembling," an emotion oftentimes subsequently found to be fully justified. *Essays* is hardly a finished text. James himself seemed viscerally incapable of completing one, if we recall his last work *Some Problems of Philosophy*. *Essays* is even less tidy—published posthumously and depending partly on some notes James had scribbled on a manila folder as to how the chapters might be ordered. Chapters included here appear elsewhere (in *A Pluralistic Universe*, for example) and references to others of James's texts appear in *Essays*. This text, in short, leaks; it points beyond itself, primarily to *A Pluralistic Universe*.

Moreover, people find what they're looking for in *Essays*. James is a realist; he's a panpsychist. Pure experience is everything; pure experience is nothing (i.e., a mere methodological postulate). In fairness, this comment about perspectivalism must be said to include the present analysis also. James himself must be held at least partly accountable for some, but not for all, of this confusion.

Teachers of this text must note two primary points or areas that require emphasis. First, teachers must highlight consciousness as a process, as relationally constituted, as functionally defined, as "no-thing" in Sartrean terminology. Consciousness is what consciousness does, etc. This point is comparatively easy to bring out, because of the wonderful job James has done in providing the reader with a thick panorama of relationships, directly experienced. In *Essays* James asserts that reality is richer than we have realized; it contains not only substantive parts but also transitive ones, and the latter may be of either a disjunctive or a conjunctive nature. These conjunctive relations hang together in varying degrees. "Philosophy," James says, "has always turned on grammatical particles. With, near, next, like, from,

towards, against, because, for, through, my—these words designate types of conjunctive relation arranged in a roughly ascending order of intimacy and inclusiveness" (James 1912, p. 45). Having asserted that for anything to be considered in philosophy it must be capable of being experienced, James now asks: "How is consciousness experienced?" And he gives a pragmatic answer. To the question, "What difference does it make if I say 'A is conscious of B' as opposed to 'A is next to B'?" James replies: A is conscious of B if and only if there is a series of intimate, conjunctive transitions between the intermediaries of A and B, through which A goes, saying "ah ha," "yes," "ah ha," etc., until he or she reaches the stage of having a vague intention fulfilled, of actually "seeing" that which s/he had in mind (see James 1912, p. 57). Consciousness, in short, is a function for James; it is not a substance. It is the function of an intimate, agreeable leading. Most important, it is not found as separate at the primary level of experience, but rather arises retrospectively as an addition. The present moment is not simply conscious; it becomes conscious insofar as it is affiliated with other moments in the past.

The more difficult task is the second one, namely, dealing with "pure experience." The latter should be viewed as more than just an upper case limit, even though James says once that it is a "methodological postulate" (James 1912, p. 160). One also needs to take seriously James's edict that anything discussed in philosophy should be capable of being experienced—not known or comprehended, mind you, but experienced. Here we must recall the sixth and final thesis in his essay "La Notion de Conscience," where James says that "things and thought are not fundamentally heterogeneous; they are made of one and the same stuff, which as such cannot be defined but only experienced" (James 1912, p. 223).

## Pure vs. "Impure" Experience: James on Language

Some progress can be made towards attaining pure experience, and its availability or non-availability, by contrasting it with "impure" experience, i.e., experience that is degenerate, sullied, fallen. Funk and Wagnell's *New Practical Standard Dictionary* (1956) defines "impure" as among other things "containing some foreign substance;" "adulterated;" "unchaste;" as "containing foreign idioms or grammatical blemishes;" as "unfit for religious use;" as "unhallowed;" etc. What would render experience "foreign," "*barbaroi*," or barbarian? What is a grammatical blemish? Is experience infected by language? How does language blemish? Does language have to blemish? Are all blemishes grammatical? Do we, you and I, live in a world of relatively impure experience? Is pure experience only for newborn babes? And people under anesthesia? Can we become childlike? Do we want to become childlike? To anesthetize is to go under. Is James, unintentionally glossing Nietzsche, calling for this? In *Essays* James says:

[W]e must remember that no dualism of being represented and representing resides in the experience per se. In its pure state, or when isolated, there is no self-splitting of it into consciousness and what the consciousness is of. Its

subjectivity and objectivity are functional attributes solely, realized only when the experience is taken i.e., talked of, twice, considered along with its two differing contexts respectively, by a new retrospective experience, of which that whole past complication now forms the fresh content. (James 1912, p. 23)

The instant field of the present is at all times what I call the “pure” experience. It is only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet.

This text carries several important points. First of all, the subject/object distinction, or the consciousness/content distinction, does not arise at the primordial level of experience. Furthermore, there is a “relativism” involved here; what functions as consciousness in one context might well function as the object of consciousness in another context. A given moment of experience can be counted twice over after it drops into the past; it can function as both consciousness and as content of consciousness. It follows from this position that we are never immediately conscious that we are conscious, or, in other words, that we are never immediately self-conscious. Consciousness of self, like consciousness of any other object-for-consciousness, is only retrospectively available. James was sympathetic with Kierkegaard’s statement that “we live forward, but we understand backward” (James 1912, p. 132, fn.). And it is precisely here that James’s views on language provide us with a key insight.

James’s love/hate relationship with language is well known. “Language works against our perception of the truth,” he says in *Principles*. “We name our thoughts simply, each after its thing, as if each knew its own thing and nothing else. What each really knows is clearly the thing it is named for, with dimly perhaps a thousand other things” (James 1890, p. 241). Elsewhere he cries out that “language is the most imperfect and expensive means yet discovered for communicating thought” (Perry 1935, p. 203). Again he says: “What an awful trade that of professor is—paid to talk, talk, talk! I have seen artists growing pale and sick whilst I talked to them without being able to stop....It would be an awful universe if everything could be converted into words, words, words” (James 1920, pp. 337-338). On the other hand James realized that language was not completely dispensable, that it had a necessary role to play. So he developed a two-pronged, more positive and nuanced view of language. First, James recognizes that a word’s meaning varies from context to context; he is cognizant of the intentional aspect of discourse and views some sentences as essentially directional in nature, rather than merely or exclusively descriptive. In *Principles*, for example, he says: “The feeling of an absence is *toto coelo* other than the absence of a feeling.... Large tracts of human speech are nothing but signs of direction in thought, of which direction we nevertheless have an acutely discriminative sense, though no definite sensorial image plays any part in it whatsoever” (James 1890, pp. 252-253).

The second positive prong of James’s positive views on language consists in his constant use of metaphor. He seemed viscerally incapable of not using metaphors. As Charlene Haddock Seigfried has pointed out, “[m]eta-

phors...reflect...[the] contextuality and revisability of discourse” (Seigfried 1990, p. 210), and several of them are to be found in *Essays*. “Life,” James says, “is confused and superabundant, and what the younger generation appears to crave is more of the temperament of life in its philosophy, even though it were at some cost of logical rigor and of formal purity.” He hopes that “a true landscape might result, less clipped, straight-edged, and artificial” (James 1912, pp. 39-40). As if to lend a personal hand in providing this messiness, he says we should compare his radical empiricist universe “to something...like one of those dried human heads with which the Dyaks of Borneo deck their lodges. The skull forms a solid nucleus; but innumerable feathers, leaves, strings, beads, and loose appendices of every description float and dangle from it, and, save that they terminate in it, seem to have nothing to do with one another” (James 1912, p. 46). Going further, he says that pure experience is like paint. “In a pot in a paint shop, along with other paints, it serves in its entirety as so much saleable matter. Spread on a canvas, with other paints around it, it represents, on the contrary, a feature in a picture and performs a spiritual function” (James 1912, p. 9). And again, “life,” James says, “is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected; often, indeed, it seems to be there more emphatically, as if our spurts and sallies forward were the real firing-line of the battle, were like the thin line of flame advancing across the dry autumnal field which the farmer proceeds to burn. In this line we live prospectively as well as retrospectively” (James 1912, p. 87).

Perhaps the best generic metaphor for getting at pure experience is the class of “affectational facts.” For James, those experiences that he terms “appreciations...form an ambiguous sphere of being, belonging with emotion on the one hand, and having objective ‘value’ on the other, yet seemingly not quite inner nor quite outer” (James 1912, p. 34). An experience of a painful object is usually also a painful experience; a perception of loneliness is a lonely perception, and so on. “Sometimes,” he says, “the adjective wanders as if uncertain where to fix itself. Shall we speak of seductive visions or of visions of seductive things?” (James 1912, p. 35). The world of the affective is more real, in the sense that it preserves the original given vagueness of experience. “With the affectational experiences...the relatively ‘pure’ condition lasts. In practical life no urgent need has yet arisen for deciding whether to treat them as rigorously mental or as rigorously physical facts. So they remain equivocal; and, as the world goes, their equivocality is one of their great conveniences” (James 1912, p. 146).

In sum then, recalling James’s views on language serves to remind us that he was aware of its necessity, but also acutely aware of its constant tendency to distort, to betray experience. For this reason James would not accept the thesis that pure experience had meaning only insofar as it had discursive significance, i.e., insofar as it was considered true or false within the confines of some specific linguistic system. More and more, James became suspicious of language, especially in its most reified form—logic.

**Pure Experience: Available in Life  
or Methodological Postulate?**

“Pure experience” is a “methodological postulate” but it is so in a very realistic sense; i.e., the linguistic term points beyond itself. Metaphysically speaking, reality is broader than the known; pure experience represents an attempt by James to get at, or disclose, being at its most primordial level. The latter is not an object, since pure experience describes an ontological situation which is prior to the subject/object dichotomy. The term “pure experience” is a concept which refers to pure experience in the same way that, for Paul Tillich, the term “God” is a symbol for God. A symbol, for Tillich, “points beyond itself while participating in that to which it points” (Tillich 1957, p. 45). Actually, the term “pure experience” is used in different, overlapping, not completely consistent ways by James. Let us flesh out some of its meanings.

“The instant field of the present is at all times what I call the ‘pure’ experience” (James 1912, p. 23). James often uses this description when he is emphasizing the relatively indeterminate given, the “quasi-chaos,” existing prior to various dualisms which arise, such as the subject/object and consciousness/content distinctions. Similar statements are: “Experience in its immediacy seems perfectly fluent” (James 1912, p. 92); and “‘Pure experience’ is the name which I gave to the immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories” (James 1912, p. 93). Here James tries to portray what is immediately given, but the irony is, what is immediately given is not immediate—it is flux, and qua flux it is the “ground” of all future statements. The present moment is really the passing moment (see James 1890, p. 282-83). As Eugene Fontinell has said:

While everyone might agree that what is immediately experienced is beyond dispute, it is quite evident that just what it is that is immediately experienced is a matter of great dispute. This is made obvious by the variety of competing, inconsistent, and even contradictory claims of immediate experience. James and a host of twentieth-century phenomenologists have significantly deepened our awareness of how difficult it is to describe with complete fidelity the characteristics of experience. There would be no such difficulty if immediate experience were clear, distinct, and unambiguous instead of being characterized by obscurities, shades, margins, fringes, penumbras, and what James has called the vague and inarticulate. (Fontinell 1986, p. 103-104)

In *Essays*, when James replies to the question “For whom is pure experience ‘available?’” his answer is rather strong: “Only new born babes, or [wo]men in semi-coma from sleep, drugs, illnesses, or blows, may be assumed to have an experience pure in the literal sense of a that which is not yet any definite what, tho’ ready to be all sorts of whats” (James 1912, p. 93). Here we have a second sense of pure experience, as describing the world as it was, before consciousness arose. However, it is as important to realize that “pure experience,” as a descriptive term for either the

present moment or the past, is itself a conception, that is, a *second hand* experience for James. “Pure experience” cannot be taken to refer exclusively to the past, because in such a formulation novelty would no longer be real; change would not take place. This position James would find untenable. But what he also realized, though he often did not state it as clearly, is that “pure experience” cannot be exclusively identified with the present—if the present is taken as immediately given—for exactly the same reasons. He verbalizes this by saying that the present is not present, i.e., is a passing moment, or by saying that the present is an activity. In short, the key to James’s different descriptions of “pure experience” here is to remember that experience grows. “Experience itself, taken at large, can grow by its edges. That one moment of it proliferates into the next by transitions which, whether conjunctive or disjunctive, continue the experimental tissue, can not, I contend, be denied” (James 1912, p. 87).

In a third sense then, pure experience refers neither exclusively to the present nor to the past, but rather denies that dichotomy as exclusive. “Pure experience” refers to a continuously changing process in which the past enters into the present, and part of the latter’s significance is as a positive or negative continuation of the past. In this formulation of pure experience, consciousness arises by way of addition qua relation. But once arisen it exhibits a curious stubbornness: it cannot simply be reduced to experience again. To do so would be to deny the reality of change. “The separation of it [pure experience] into consciousness and content comes, not by way of subtraction, but by way of addition—the addition, to a given concrete piece of it, of other sets of experiences, in connection with which severally its use or function may be of two different kinds” (James 1912, p. 9). In this third sense consciousness has come upon the scene, with the result that “it happens relatively seldom that...[a] new fact is added *raw*. More usually it is embedded cooked, as one might say, or stewed down in the sauce of the old” (James 1907, p. 169). Pure experience is a continually changing process in which the very relation of consciousness itself adds to the reality. This formulation transcends the present/past distinction.

But even this last linguistic formulation of pure experience is a conceptualization, though it refers to a level of reality beneath the exclusivity of concepts. Furthermore, James realized that, not only is this “final” conceptualization inadequate, but conceptualization as such is inadequate. Nonetheless conceptualization seems necessary. This view is found primarily in *A Pluralistic Universe*.

In *The Principles of Psychology* James had adopted a mind/body dualism. His description of consciousness, however, ultimately rendered this dichotomy inadequate. James began to remedy this in the *Essays* by rejecting the consciousness/content dichotomy. He did so by discarding consciousness as a separate substance and retaining only a functional view. But as James continued his specification of the problem, he realized more clearly that not consciousness but language, and particularly ideal language (i.e., logic), was the “enemy,” and had, therefore, to be rejected. He says, in a strong statement:

For my own part, I have finally found myself compelled to *give up the logic*, fairly, squarely, and irrevocably. It has an imperishable use in human life, but that use is not to make us theoretically acquainted with the essential nature of reality.... Reality, life, experience, concreteness, immediacy, use what word you will, exceeds our logic, overflows and surrounds it. If you like to employ words eulogistically, as most men do, and so encourage confusion, you may say that reality obeys a higher logic, or enjoys a higher rationality. But I think that even eulogistic words should be used rather to distinguish than to commingle meanings, so I prefer bluntly to call reality if not irrational then at least non-rational in its constitution, and by reality here I mean reality where things *happen*, all temporal reality without exception. I myself find no good warrant for even suspecting the existence of any reality of a higher denomination than that distributed and strung-along and flowing sort of reality which we finite beings swim in. That is the sort of reality given us, and that is the sort with which logic is so incommensurable. (James 1909, pp. 212-213)

James realized that logic, or language, ironically enough, was necessary, even though sometimes insulating. The above quotation indicates as much; furthermore, James was quite willing to ascribe “a primarily theoretical function to our intellect” (James 1909, p. 249), and not to condone a simple reductionism. However, he believed that the intellect as such could not deal with the whole of reality, though it cannot avoid dealing with “part” of it. “Thought deals thus solely with surfaces. It can name the thickness of reality, but it cannot fathom it, and its insufficiency here is essential and permanent, not temporary” (James 1909, p. 250).

In this position, reality is greater than the conceptual. More important, it is greater than the possibly conceptual. Reality cannot be completely put into thought, or more specifically, into language. Reality may be partly available through language, but the language user must transcend the limitations of language, must show the insufficiency of language itself.

### Pure Experience in Art, Religion, and Sport

Initially, in attempting to renounce his functional dualism, James had said that pure experience was available only to newborn babes, persons under anesthesia, and the like; in short, to persons who were “unconscious.” But in *A Pluralistic Universe* James, having clarified the problem, became more optimistic. Reality is “available” to those who use language in such a way as to transcend language, to those who are not trapped by the bewitchment of language, to those who realize that the word “activity” is not the experience of activity.

Locating the difficulty in language rather than in consciousness itself also allows for the possibility that we might achieve or return to pure experience, at least temporarily, by passing beyond language. There are two obvious conduits to this state—and both were highly prized by James; namely, religion and art.

The reference to pure vs. impure experience alluded to at the beginning of this paper quickly calls attention to a rather heavenly state, now lost through the “sin” of language—as well as to the possibility of panpsychism, something specifically connected to radical empiricism in *Essays* (James 1912, p. 89). In addition, we must also remember that radical empiricism is specifically identified with “pluralistic pantheism” in *A Pluralistic Universe* (James 1909, p. 35). James stresses that “namelessness is compatible with existence” (James 1890, p. 251), and in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* he clearly leaves the door open for this non-describable experience, saying that “our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the flimsiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different....No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded” (James 1902, p. 388).

Second, strange as it seems, James, the person who first turned to art (painting) as a possible career, nonetheless makes no use of this path as a possible return to pure experience in the *Essays*, though images such as the sculptor carving out life are to be found elsewhere (James 1907, p. 247; James 1890, pp. 288-89). In the classroom, when one of us (Gavin) has asked his students if they have ever had a glimpse of pure experience, responses have often been forthcoming from this area. One student talked about once having been thoroughly engaged in playing music, to the extent that she became at one with the music. She said, to put it perhaps a bit more precisely, she was aware of no separation among the music, the instruments, or the players. Nor was she aware of any distinction between visual, auditory, and sensory modes of experience. Another student talked about the process involved in becoming a member of the Martha Graham modern dance company. One first masters technical difficulties, after which that which was conscious becomes unconscious and she (the dancer) and her medium are one, unifying body, will, attention, memory, intellect and aesthetic spirit (Pierce 1997, pp. 229-35). The Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaro, in his work *An Inquiry Into the Good*, a text explicitly influenced by James’s notion of pure experience, gives as examples of the latter “a climber’s determined ascent of a cliff and a musician’s performance of a piece that has been mastered through practice” (Nishida 1990, p. 6).

James, of course, remained a talker, a user of discourse and language, right up to the very end of his life. But he remains constantly aware of both the need for and the insufficiency of language. In *A Pluralistic Universe* he says to the reader:

As long as one continues *talking*, intellectualism remains in undisturbed possession of the field. The return to life can’t come about by talking. It is an *act*; to make you return to life, I must set an example for your imitation, I must deafen you to talk, or to the importance of talk, by showing you...that the concepts we talk with are made for purposes of *practice* and not for purposes of insight. Or I must *point*, point to the mere *that* of life, and you by inner sym-

pathy must fill out the *what* for yourselves. (James 1909, p. 290)

James’s own writing of the text is, in a sense, a pointing. *Essays* is a provocation, so to speak. It points beyond itself—toward *A Pluralistic Universe*, toward life and pure experience itself. It also points toward other, more contemporary texts, provoking ongoing discussion concerning what James really meant by “pure experience” and the degree to which he thought it may be available to common experience. Among the most significant of those texts are works written by the well-known positive psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

### The Characteristics of Flow

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has spent decades studying the mental state he calls “flow.” He describes it as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 4). Having begun by studying this state in rock climbers, composers of music, chess players, and amateur athletes (since they spend lots of time engaged in difficult activities that carry with them no obvious external rewards), he has since found that flow is widely experienced by persons of all ages, races, ethnicities, genders, and nationalities (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 48).

What is the relation between flow and pure experience? Are they identical? Is one a special case of the other? Are they related but different kinds of experiences? A careful examination of the eight major components of flow identified by Csikszentmihalyi may help us answer some of these questions (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, pp. 49-67).

The first component of flow is that it often occurs when we are immersed in a challenging activity that requires skills. While optimal experiences can occur spontaneously, for no immediately apparent reason, they most often occur when we are engaged in goal-directed, rule-bound activities. In particular, flow tends to occur when our skills match the challenges of these activities. If our skills are greater than the challenges, we will experience boredom; if our skills are not up to the challenges, we will suffer anxiety. Reading, socializing, and competitive games and sports (when winning isn’t the only valued outcome) are activities that lead to flow for many people.

The second component of flow is the merging of action and awareness. In flow, the activity we are engaged in takes all of our attention, and we “become one” with the activity. Although the activity may well be strenuous and require great effort and discipline, it seems to happen almost automatically. Dancers, rock climbers, and chess players often report such complete absorption in their activities.

The third and fourth components of flow are having clear goals and receiving immediate feedback. A tennis player, for example, has clear goals that govern her actions. She also has immediate feedback as to how her actions relate to her goals. Her basic goal is to return the

ball to her opponent’s side of the court; every time she hits the ball she receives immediate feedback on whether she has met her goal. A painter’s overall goal may be less clear, since he may not have fully in mind the results he is after. Still, as he moves forward in his painting, he typically will have a sense as to whether he is moving in the right direction or not.

Fifth is the concentration on the task at hand. Because our attention is fully absorbed by the activity we are engaged in, we have no room in our consciousness to be aware of anything else. We forget for the moment the petty annoyances and anxieties of everyday life. We forget the many things we have on our to-do list, and we have no awareness of our insecurities.

Sixth is the paradox of control. In flow experiences, our concern about losing control is greatly diminished, because the consequences of failure in the activity are usually temporary and separate from the normal course of our lives. In activities like spelunking, hang-gliding, and race-car driving, flow may follow directly from our ability to control the risk inherent in these activities. Csikszentmihalyi writes that “what people enjoy is not the sense of *being* in control, but the sense of *exercising* control in difficult situations. It is not possible to experience a feeling of control unless one is willing to give up the safety of protective routines. Only when a doubtful outcome is at stake, and one is able to influence that outcome, can a person really know whether she is in control” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 61).

Seventh is the loss of self-consciousness. This too is a result of the total absorption of a flow experience. Because our entire attention is taken up by the activity we are engaged in, we are no longer aware of ourselves, of our self-representation of who we are.

The eighth and final component of flow is the transformation of time. In many experiences of flow, our subjective sense of time seems to have little relation to objective time. Most often, subjective time in flow moves much more quickly than does objective time. Occasionally, it moves more slowly. It may be that this too is a by-product of the total absorption we experience in flow.

### Flow and Pure Experience

With this brief description of the components of flow in mind, we can now explore the relation between flow and pure experience. On the one hand, it may seem unreasonable to expect there to be any overlap at all between these two experiences. What could James’s pure experience possibly have in common with an experience that requires skills, goals, feedback, and control? Don’t all these components presuppose a relation to external experience? Worse still, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) goes on to describe flow as an “autotelic” experience. By this he means that flow is an end in itself, an activity “that is done not with the expectation of some future benefit, but simply because the doing itself is the reward” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 67). It is unclear how pure experience would have anything to do with an experience that is “telic” of any sort, or that is valued for being rewarding.

On the other hand, a more careful analysis of the components of flow may yield some unexpected similarities to pure experience. First, it seems that awareness of these components of flow is external to the state itself. To what extent are these components constitutive of flow, and to what extent are they products of a subsequent conscious reconstruction of the experience? Second, Csikszentmihalyi is not clear here how many of his eight components must be present for flow to occur. He writes, “When people reflect on how it feels when their experience is most positive, they mention at least one, and often all of the [eight components]” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 49). While skills, goals, feedback, and control do not sound much like pure experience, the other components may be by-products of something that does. In his description of the second, fifth, seventh, and (possibly) eighth components, Csikszentmihalyi notes that they are by-products of the complete absorption of flow. If it is true that we can be aware of no more than seven bits of information at one time (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, pp. 28-29), flow occurs when each of those seven bits are related to a single activity. When this happens—when our complete attention is taken by a single activity—then we merge with the activity, having no awareness of anything external to the activity, including our sense of self. It may also be that the transformation of our subjective sense of time is a by-product of this absorption.

If it turns out that complete absorption is a sufficient condition for flow, then there may be at least some cases of flow that are also cases of Jamesian pure experience. Or at least this may be the case on some readings of James.

It will be helpful here to review the distinction James makes in the *Principles of Psychology* between sensation and perception. He refers to sensation as being temporally prior to perception and to all other psychological functions, as well. A pure sensation, for James, is a consciousness of the unmodified data supplied by the senses. Because of the structure of our brains, pure sensation can occur only in the first few weeks of life. These first impressions leave copies that are stored in the brain and that can be called up again in the imagination after the actual impressions are gone. Subsequent impressions automatically call up these copies through association. Thus, after the first few weeks of life, our experience of the external world is a weaving together of sensations with these old associations and is properly referred to as perception (see James 1890, vol. 2, pp. 1-9).<sup>1</sup>

This distinction is important for our understanding of

the availability of pure experience. If pure experience is taken to mean “pure sensation,” then no flow experience occurring after the first few weeks of life would qualify. If, on the other hand, pure experience is taken to include “pure perception” as well, then adult experiences of total absorption would certainly seem to qualify. And if total absorption is a sufficient condition for flow, then it would seem that at least some cases of flow would also be cases of pure experience. The examples cited above from students would seem to be just such cases.<sup>2</sup>

This discussion is meant to be suggestive, not definitive. The question of just what James might have meant by “pure experience” is not an easy one to answer. The state of flow, as identified and studied by contemporary psychologists, gives us another perspective to use in trying to understand James’s views. This is an area in which much more fruitful work remains to be done.

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<sup>1</sup> It must be admitted, however, that James is not always consistent in his use of the terms sensation, perception, and conception. We base the present discussion of the usage James adopts in Chapter XVII of *Principles*. But we should point out that James sometimes makes a two-fold and sometimes a three-fold distinction, using the difference between knowledge-by-acquaintance and knowledge-about as his criterion of demarcation, and always in a very contextual fashion. Going further, James seems, at different places, to use the term “perceptual” in two different senses. In the narrower sense, it is the *conceptual* alternative to conceptions. In the wider sense, the “perceptual” as a descriptor of the “really real,” *includes* the conceptual (Cf. Gavin, 1992, pp. 64-69).

<sup>2</sup> Here also we can see the importance of framing the issue or “inventing the problem” in terms of language rather than consciousness. Pure experience, understood as total absorption, might well be viewed as going beyond language but not beyond conscious awareness per se.

# Endurance Sport

by Douglas R. Anderson and Richard Lally

In writing reflectively about ordinary human experiences, one runs the risk of being considered unphilosophical. As John McDermott (1999) points out in *Trumping Cynicism with Imagination*, “somehow, the philosophy crowd thinks that I’m less if I’m understood.” For our present task, we turn to the exemplary work of William James, master of the genre of popular philosophy. James’s radical empiricism, an empiricism that underwrites Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s various studies of what he calls “flow” experiences, is useful for examining human movement for two primary reasons. First, James makes thought ancillary to experience itself. Thus, concepts are tools for making our experiences articulate, though James maintains that thought never fully captures the thickness of the world as we experience it. In this way, radical empiricism, which is “radical” because it includes our experiences of relations as well as of things, lets experience speak for itself and does not try to make it fit an *a priori* logical scheme. As Henry Bugbee (1999) put it: “Such a philosophy will not be set up like the solution of a puzzle....It will be more like the clarification of what we know in our bones” (p. 35). The second reason is that James’s radical empiricism is inclusive of all features of experience. Again, unlike traditional British empiricism, James’s version does not begin with an ontological atomism but lets experience reveal its own continuities and discontinuities. For the practice of talking about our participation in endurance sports the advantage is that we can allow the experiences full rein; we can explore the details of emotions, physical responses, environment, reflections, and so on—all of this, in James’s world, counts as philosophical. Put another way, as in James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), all of these details count as “evidence” in a “science” of endurance sport. In short, radical empiricism allows philosophy to move directly to experience and to engage in reflective analysis that is metaphysical without being reductive.

Using this radically empirical method as background, we want to examine briefly four of James’s essays and suggest the ways in which they help us give articulation to the meaning or significance of our own endurance sport practices. The four essays are “What Makes a Life Significant,” “The Will to Believe,” “The Energies of Men,” and “The Moral Equivalent of War.” The first two help give voice to our own existential reasons for engaging in endurance sports. The latter two allow us to say more about the internal experiences of our practices. Furthermore, we will employ the work of Csikszentmihalyi to identify features of the internal and external significance of our endurance sport experiences. His conception of “flow” serves as an avenue for articulating the pragmatic meaning these experiences hold for us.

There are many reasons why one might undertake an endurance sport practice involving engagement in races such as triathlons, marathons, and ultras (races 50 miles and up). Among these are weight loss, conditioning, the

meeting of technical goals such as best times and relative placement in finishes, showing off one’s abilities, and so forth. Each of these might be a worthy motive, but in our experiences none of these would sustain our practice. Our own primary motive seems to be that endurance training provides the setting for a sustained inquiry into the meaning and import of our own lives, to the lessons of suffering and possibility, as well as of failure and loss. James (1899/1968) makes explicit reference to this sort of motive in “What Makes a Life Significant.”

The essay opens with James attending an upscale summer institute at “the Assembly Grounds on the borders of Chautauqua Lake” in central New York state (James 1899/1968, p. 646). James quickly comes to sense that something is wrong in this “middle-class paradise,” just as we, like Thoreau, have sensed something amiss with the everyday experience of our own American middle class existence. To put it baldly, there is something lacking or inadequate in a life of pure over-civilization, comfort, and security—there is a residual “quiet desperation” concerning both our daily existence and the meaning to which such a life leads. On leaving the Assembly Grounds, James remarked to himself: “Ouf, what a relief! Now for something primordial and savage....This order is too tame, the culture is too second-rate, this goodness too uninspiring” (James 1899/1968, p. 647).

We want to be careful not simply to romanticize endurance practices however. There are many avenues to avoiding or overcoming “quiet desperation” and we only want to suggest that endurance sport practices may, for some, be one of them. It is not a panacea for everyone or even for every practitioner, and certainly should not be condensed and sold as a life-saving infomercial. For us, it has simply been one useful route to exploring our own personal possibilities and thus to exploring what makes *our lives* significant.

James points out that we all choose ideals for guiding our lives. Our own “process ideal” of staying awake to life is not met when that life is eight hours of work, eight hours of sleep, four hours of television, and four hours of busy-work. What was lacking in Chautauqua and in our own existences was “the element of precipitousness, so to call it, of strength and strenuousness, intensity, and danger” (James 1899/1968, p. 648). What endurance practices have yielded for us is some of this precipitousness. It provides a habitual experimentation with our physical, emotional, and intellectual well-being. The fact that the *experimentation* is habitual means that our findings and our aims are *not* habitual—experiment is always alert to the surprises of life. That is, our practice allows for the consideration of the ideals that we might find life-transforming. The test, the experiment is ongoing and gives context to the ideals we already have and creates room for the development of further ideals. The endurance practice, like the work James refers to in the wielding of an axe, a scythe, or a shovel, simply provides the precipitous experience that keeps us alive to other possibilities in our lives. In short, our ideals are not limited to faster splits but open onto the general terrain of our lives: our reading, our thinking, our relation-

ships, our inheritances, and our bequests to other persons and the world. The practice establishes for us a version of a strenuous existence in which novelty is neither simply rejected nor accepted, but is explored for its possible consequences. Thus, for us, as for James, “The solid meaning of life is always the same eternal thing—the marriage, namely, of some unhabitual ideal, however special, with some fidelity, courage, and endurance; with some man’s or woman’s pains” (James 1899/1968, p. 659). What our experience of endurance practices reveals is the pursuit of the ideal of an awakened life *in* which other specific and novel ideals may arise and be pursued. It is a version of what Thoreau (1854/1962) identified in *Walden* as “living deliberately.”

Even if not thoroughly romanticized, our description of endurance sport practices does seem to claim a good deal insofar as we suggest the importance of these practices for pursuing significance in our own lives. We don’t retreat from these claims, but it is important to recognize that the practices are both deliberate and chosen. Not just *any* suffering, pain, or loss will automatically lead to such a clearing for the consideration of ideals. To engage in endurance practices—or any extensive physical training—is to choose a specific sort of physical suffering. It is worth asking, then, how one might come to make this choice to pursue endurance sport in this vein. To answer this question we turn to James’s (1896/1968) essay “The Will to Believe.”

In “The Will to Believe” James’s anti-Hegelianism leads him to see the world as unfinished, as a place in which the litter of history and human existence is never fully cleaned up. In short, it is a world in which we do not know the outcomes. In such a world, a lived comfort or security may easily block self-development simply because our fears of losing the limited stability paralyze us. James viewed the operation of such fear as an existential mistake, since without risking what we have to the real possibility of failure and loss, we have *no* possibility for growth.<sup>1</sup>

How, then, does one subvert the work of this fear? James asks us to begin with the uncertainty we actually face. When reason cannot tell us definitively what to do, we should allow what he calls our “passional nature” into the equation. It is at this juncture that endurance practices gain existential purchase in our lives. We began, as did James, by willing a belief—that is, by believing that these endurance practices, strange as they initially seem to some, would have some pay-off in the making of our lives. We entered the practices without guarantees, but we each had a sense—a Bergsonian intuition—or perhaps a perception of possibilities. We had engaged in more limited practices of running, riding, swimming, and hiking. We had experienced perceptual hints of what endurance sport might have to offer. And we had seen others already engaged. We had watched Ironman participants cash it in, unable to walk in the tenth mile of a twenty-six mile run,

and we had seen Kenyan runners finish marathons in seemingly effortless movement. We had imagined running a hundred miles of Vermont terrain; we had marveled at the very audacity of the Western States 100 in which participants race from the floor of Squaw Valley, California to Elevation Pass at 8,750 feet above sea level.

James’s “will to believe” in its rawest form is articulate and reasonable license to choose something one hopes will make a difference. W. K. Clifford, whose “ethics of belief” James opposed in the essay, would tell us to play it safe in the absence of knowledge of the outcome of our practices. Notoriously, Clifford tells the story of the sea captain who, in the absence of certainty concerning the seaworthiness of his ship, is morally obliged not to brave the Atlantic even though a successful voyage might be of momentous import to his hundred passengers. James, on the contrary, tells us to play for keeps. For James, excessive prudence is a route to definite loss; we must, he suggests, weigh the passional momentousness in light of our uncertainty. We may be justified in willing the crossing on passional grounds. It is precisely in this spirit that extreme endurance tests may become integral to one’s life.

The force of the will to believe is felt, however, not merely in the choosing of our beliefs and practices, but in how we conduct ourselves in the practices we choose. If we play for keeps in willing ourselves to engage in some interesting, momentous, or life-transforming practice, we should also play for keeps in the ways we engage in that practice. James’s two late essays, “The Energies of Men” (1907/1968) and “The Moral Equivalent of War” (1910/1968), offer further insight into the internality of the practices of endurance athletics.

At the outset of his essay “The Energies of Men,” James lays out two areas he intends to address. The first, is an exploration of the possible extent of our powers. The second is a search for the various keys of unlocking them in diverse individuals. James hints at the fact that life tends to possess us, that we experience it as it envelops us, and that this symbiotic relationship is easiest on both parties when they take little notice of each other. He feels that we spend the majority of our days in a cohabitation of convenience with experience, satisfied with getting through the day safely while demanding little of our existence beyond rudimentary daily tasks. In demanding only the minimum of ourselves in terms of exertion we forfeit our access to the richer marrow of life lived *in extremis*. James calls us to find a means of escape from the common passivity that afflicts us, an avenue of access to the untapped potential we each possess yet rarely use. We are asleep to the possibilities of enduring that we might harbor in our lives.

In “Energies,” James claims that most of us have “a habit of inferiority to our full self” that causes us to live at a level below what is potentially attainable (James 1907/1968, p. 674). This limiting habit manifests itself in a willingness to live at less than full steam. With this concern at the forefront of his thought, James consistently stressed the individual’s responsibility for building an existence of heightened engagement, notable for its effort and striving when compared to our more common state of being. As a

<sup>1</sup> Csikszentmihalyi and Susan Jackson (1999), in *Flow in Sports*, also point out the importance of failure and the risk of failure to individual growth in athletic performance. See pp. 98-99.

result, the Jamesian ideal was a life lived in action, a strenuous and sometimes sloppy affair, rich in both drama and dirt.

If the endurance athlete, or any athlete, is never compelled to push beyond what is normally demanded, she will never know the fullness of her capabilities. As Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi (1999) put it, "Extending limits is a key to creating the right level of challenge" (p. 27). When James (1907/1968) asserts that we are only half-awake and that our "fires are damped, our drafts checked" he affixes blame in a way, condemning *us* for our willingness to be less than what is possible (James 1907/1968, p. 674). The freedom and, more importantly, the willingness to choose the mediocre over the brilliant weigh heavily on us as we go about filling our days. Through sport, we have the possibility, relative to our own actual abilities, for the brilliant—an opportunity to create, to suffer, to achieve and fail, and most importantly, the chance to act on behalf of our own possibilities that otherwise may go unexplored.

James calls upon us to stake a claim regarding our ideals, our ideas of what is good, just, and true. And once our position is articulated, we are required by the radical empiricist approach to test the validity of those claims. Disconnected commentary, or more accurately, commentary without cost, will not do. The athlete, or academic, who is content to get by re-telling a predecessor's story, while avoiding any personal verification of those claims through his or her own lived experience, risks a great deal.

It is in the contested realm, where failure is as likely as success, that an athlete's pragmatic "truth" is created. Endurance sport stretches us, taxing us beyond the norms of daily existence, demanding of us effort, while returning the occasional dose of enlightenment. In "Energies," James asserts that the best "practical knowers of the human soul" have committed themselves to a methodical ascetic discipline. In James's words, these ascetic devotees begin "with easy tasks, passing to harder ones and exercising day by day" and through this opportunity to be ordinary they "can reach very high levels of freedom and power of the will" (James 1907/1968, p. 679). His words foreshadow the almost unbelievable habits of Japan's Tendai Buddhists or "marathon monks," who, in each of their first three years, run a 30 kilometer course one hundred days in a row. Their endurance practices, which they make a part of daily life, are exemplary and reveal the tremendous capabilities harbored in human existence.

The marathon monks establish an amazing standard for human possibilities, but energies are available at all levels. The novice runner, who has been covering miles for two months, has experienced a growth in ability. She has also participated long enough to gain a sense of historic distance that allows for a tallying up of costs. Sacrifices have been made, fidelity has been demonstrated, courage has been exhibited, and suffering has been endured. As the novice becomes a veteran, she heads out the door each day to pick up the commitment she put down the day before, and in doing so, discovers she is capable of far more, and far less, than she believed. As James noted, "the transformation...is a chronic one: the new level of energy

becomes permanent" (James 1907/1968, p. 675).

One of us (Richard Lally) took up a training ritual several summers ago: My cycling training was done in the company of a triathlete whose ability was far greater than my own. Each day in the early months of training I set out with him, aware that I would be returning alone, unable to match his speed for the full length of the ride. Our training was conducted in a business-like fashion. We understood from the earliest days of May that the next few months would be spent riding in the stifling heat, pushing ourselves for hours. If energy remained, the end of the day might bring some friendly exchanges over barbeque and beer, but more often than not, fatigue kept the conversations to a minimum. We would devour our food and retreat to the comfort of our beds to prepare for more of the same the next morning.

When the alarm would sound in the darkness of pre-dawn I would crawl out of the sheets with the enthusiasm of a canary on the way to the coal mine. There was no need to wonder about what awaited me. I would eat a quick breakfast, change into my all too familiar gear, and shuffle out into the already warm morning air. Any enthusiasm I had in April, when a summer spent outside under blue skies seemed appealing, had dissolved. I was reporting for another day of work, doomed to spend the next six hours playing the role of whipping boy to a task master who cared little for my well-being.

That summer's experience taught that drastic improvements in athletic performance happen in just this way. They are costly, requiring the athlete to spend her or his living capital to attain them. There is always a breaking down prior to the building up; bravado is always replaced by humility. In "The Moral Equivalent of War," James (1910/1968) pursues these features of the strenuous life in other directions. A life is not a straightforward biological gift. It must, he says, be built or achieved through doing, suffering, and creating. To grow, persons must be stretched, if not in one way then in another.

Twenty-first century existence for most inhabitants of the first world is notable for its lack of experiences that test the tensile strength of the human will. Improved transportation, industry, medicine, etc. have, at least for the middle and upper classes, removed many of the obstacles to survival that have historically been a part of human existence. With technological developments in travel and communication, space and time no longer present insurmountable difficulties for human interaction. Unfortunately, the advances made over time have also created negative consequences that are less noticeable. Inhabitants of the developed world can lead lives devoid of physical exertion. James felt that the absence of exertion, or what he called the *strong life*, in modern society had eliminated important cultivating experiences from our lives. In "The Moral Equivalent of War," he encourages his audience to seek out new *strong* experiences that make the development of the will possible. These experiences would be war-like in their intensity but without the debilitating effects of cultural antagonism and actual combat. In each the normal guarantees of safety and ease are revoked and an accurate

assessment of one's self is possible. James believed it was these moments of heightened engagement that offered the chance for the establishment of valid truth.

Most triathlons begin prior to nine in the morning. In order to be ready for the starting gun, the athlete must arrive at least an hour early, as bikes must be racked, bodies numbered, water bottles filled, race packets picked up, transition areas arranged, the bathroom visited (several times), and warm-ups completed. Nothing encountered during training can prepare you for the sharpness of race morning. Your stomach turns, your skin warms and cools, your movements are quicker and calculated. There is a constant internal dialogue: "How do I feel? "Why are my legs so heavy?; "Do I need to get in line for the toilets, again?" You check and re-check your bike; you eye the swim and decide that the distance cannot be correct. You stretch for the first time since your last race, managing to walk by a thousand other racers without sharing a glance.

As you wade out into the water, you assess its temperature: "This wetsuit is too much, not enough, just right." You prepare yourself to be kicked and dunked by the other adrenaline-filled competitors, and for a brief moment you are not sure you know how to swim. In a desperate psychological ploy, you attempt to convince yourself that this is all for fun, and that you are content to be in the company of others with similar interests. Above all else, you tell yourself to be satisfied with finishing. In total, the unceasing noise in your head amounts to nothing more than the hollow thoughts of a nervous man. Despite the psychological deal making, you are unconvinced with your own *relax and enjoy* rhetoric—the day means much more.

You exist completely within that moment, yet, paradoxically, your universe seems to expand rather than narrow. As Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi (1999) suggest, "Action and awareness merge" as "you become totally absorbed in what you are doing" (p. 20). After all the hard work and sacrifice, you entertain thoughts of walking away. Knowledge of the effort that will soon be required is frightening, causing the once confident athlete to grow tentative. Words are used sparingly and always in hushed tones, as if unnecessary volume may pirate away energy that will be needed in battle hours from now.

As a competitor you have come, as James would say, to do battle with the universe, intent on overcoming the socialized tendency to surrender in the face of formidable resistance. As James did, you have recognized the connection between the arduous undertaking and the cultivation of the finest parts of our humanity. You are about to experience the type of actualizing hardship James deemed necessary.

Sweat and effort, human nature strained to its uttermost and on the rack, yet getting through alive, and then turning its back on its success to pursue another more rare and arduous still this is the sort of thing the presence of which inspires us, and the reality of which it seems to be the function of all the higher forms of literature and fine art to bring home to us and suggest (James 1899/1968, p. 648).

James brings us to the brink of the pragmatic meaning of special experiences in endurance sport. However, many of James's discussions of epiphanic moments in human lives are limited to the consideration of religious experiences. Csikszentmihalyi takes a somewhat wider look, tracking such moments across a multiplicity of human practices, including endurance sport.

In his various discussions of "flow," Csikszentmihalyi gives fuller articulation to the meaning of these heightened experiences; his work is thus an important addendum to James's outlook and to our consideration of endurance sport practices. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) emphasizes the autotelic nature of flow experiences in which "living becomes its own justification" (p. 32). "The metaphor of flow," he says, "is one that many people have used to describe the sense of effortless action they feel in moments that stand out as the best in their lives" (p. 29). From a radically empirical standpoint, as we have already noted, this makes sense of some experiences in endurance sport, especially those experiences that make the practice important to us. Experiences characterizable by the metaphor of flow—epiphanic experiences—become lived ideals that are at once self-justifying and standard-setting for other features of our lives. James's and Csikszentmihalyi's descriptive accounts of such heightened experiences overlap extensively, though we haven't room here to develop this convergence of views. It is sufficient to note that in general they agree about the internal *arête* or excellence of flow experiences. What Csikszentmihalyi adds is 1) a wider variety of venues in which such experiences occur, and 2) a more extended look at the consequences and cash value of these experiences. He elaborates on their pragmatic meaning.

The first "teaching" of these experiences is that living *can be*, on occasion, its own significance. Humanity does not live at the mercy of narrow instrumentalism; just being human is sometimes enough; we can take aim at epiphanic or flow experiences. This is of course not a new claim in the history of thought, but what Csikszentmihalyi, following James, does is to disclose to us our own experiential versions of this truth. He examines athletes, laborers, managers, musicians, and others to assess the pervasiveness of flow experiences. We needn't look elsewhere for self-justifying experiences; we need only bring the proper attitudes to bear on our own daily practices. The autotelic feel of our endurance practices, which is given a general place in James's descriptions of the strenuous mood, is provided a fuller contextual home in Csikszentmihalyi's descriptions of flow. Indeed, Csikszentmihalyi early on recognized sport as an excellent locus for heightened human experience; it is after all "the one place where [an athlete's] full senses can be honed, where they can be absorbed fully in their activity" (1999, p. 64).

The autotelic nature of these absorbing experiences, however, does not preclude them from having consequences that lead out beyond themselves. They suggest that such modes of experience might be found in other areas of our lives. They establish the possibility of coming at various aspects of our lives in an altered attitude. As

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Csikszentmihalyi suggests, “the excellence of daily life finally depends not on what we do, but on *how* we do it” (1997, p. 47). Thus, our endurance practices set a standard or provide a measure that we may extend to other features of life (see Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, p. 153). They open up possibilities for a generally enhanced life, one that battles the tendency toward quiet desperation. As James suggests in “The Will to Believe” and as Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi (1999) state explicitly: “Our beliefs about what we can do are a powerful influence on what we attempt to do” (p. 51).

The standards and measures set by heightened, “life-enhancing” experiences can be cashed out further (1999, p. 79). They bring levels of depth and complexity to our lives that catalyze a more general growth; they illuminate everything else we do and provide perspective on other aspects of our lives. In the middle of a long run one may see one’s self with more clarity and purity than at other times. As Roger Bannister (1981), the world’s first four-minute miler, recalls of an early run on a beach:

A few more steps self-consciously now and firmly gripping the original excitement. The earth seemed almost to move with me. I was running now, and a fresh rhythm entered my body. No longer conscious of movement I discovered a new unity with nature. I had found a new source of power and beauty, a source I never dreamt existed. (pp. 11-12)

Moreover, one gains perspective on the irrelevance of body and gender politics when one lives strenuously. In the midst of an “ironman” event one no longer worries about what body parts are showing in what ways or whether it was a male or female who rode by on the last bike. It has often been argued that the study of the liberal arts is humanizing, that it provides us with depth of meaning and breadth of perspective. We agree with this but believe that endurance sport practices, and other practices, can have a similar effect, one that may go unnoticed in an academically-oriented culture. As we have noted, the suffering, the failures, the successes, and the simple endurance together work a transformation of our individual worlds. Taken together, they generate a fuller meaning for our lives, a meaning that is neither fully articulable nor fully ineffable. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) describes this meaning as additive complexity, an enrichment of what we are that yields a “growth in consciousness” (p. 32). It is at this juncture that one faces the charge of “new-ageism” or “pop” philosophy. But, put in Jamesian terms the issue is quite simple—endurance practices, and especially the heightened experiences that occur in these practices, constitute an experienceable difference in our lives. They are, in their way, as humanizing as the study of the arts; they deepen and broaden experience in specific ways for specific practitioners. The Tendai Buddhists clearly recognize and exemplify these transformative powers of endurance. The virtue of Csikszentmihalyi’s work, in taking up James’s emphasis on the strenuous life, is that it pays close attention to this fact without overly romanticizing or fic-

tionalizing it and without, on the other hand, turning to the standard reductive practices of twentieth century social science. As a radical empiricist, he opens a window on to the consideration of the importances that we feel under the sway of such practices and experiences.

What James and Csikszentmihalyi help us to realize and remember is that one’s endurance performances can also be heroic engagements that are works of fine art created in ordinary living. Knowing that our energies are more than we imagine and knowing that the battles with pain and nerves are part and parcel of a well-lived life do not eliminate pre-race jitters, nor does such knowing overcome the actuality of physical and emotional pains suffered while performing. Rather, what James and Csikszentmihalyi offer us is a way of making sense of what we do within endurance practices. Pushing to limits, taking up battles, and living strenuously are not functions of madness—they are internal features in the development of a creative act, an artistic act—an act of self-revision.<sup>2</sup> And, on occasion, the internality of such a creative act will open onto a panoramic view of human existence in such a way as to allow us to be articulate about what our ideals are and about what human existence might, in part, mean. This is a meliorism not of wishful thinking but of existential force.

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2. For an interesting look at the implications of this artistic act for the human body, see Richard Shusterman’s “Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 57 (1999), pp. 299-313.

# *William James and the Varieties of Optimal States of Consciousness*

by Grant Jewell Rich

## Introduction

William James's influence on 20<sup>th</sup> century American psychology is undeniable. As author of *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), arguably psychology's first textbook, he introduced his conceptualization of the field to a generation of psychologists. As a teacher, he was able to attract first-rate pupils. For instance, G. Stanley Hall, an instructor at Antioch College, left his position in Ohio, earned his Ph.D. under James, and later went on to found and become the first president of the American Psychological Association (Bjork 1997).

Slightly over one hundred years later, Martin Seligman served as president of the Association that Hall founded. During his 1998 tenure as president of the American Psychological Association, Seligman founded positive psychology, a new "science of positive subjective experience, positive traits, and positive institutions." Positive psychology aims to examine, among other things, "hope, wisdom, creativity,... courage [and] spirituality" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000, p. 5). What influence, if any, has James had upon positive psychology? Recently several scholars have attempted to study James's importance for positive psychology (e.g., Pawelski 2003; Rathunde 2001; Taylor 2001).

While James left his imprint on modern psychology in numerous ways, perhaps his connection to positive psychology is most clearly seen in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. First published in 1902, the book offers a roadmap for the study of optimal states of consciousness. Positive psychologists who study subjective well-being, happiness, "flow," altered states, psychoneuroimmunology, and relaxation techniques such as meditation and yoga owe much to James in terms of the content of their work. In addition, positive psychologists owe much to James in terms of their methods. James, a radical empiricist, aimed to avoid several methodological pitfalls. First, he aimed to avoid armchair rationalism and pure speculation. James insisted upon data, not theory alone. Second, James aimed to avoid the complete reductionism often found in laboratory experiments (Pawelski 2003).

In a recent article in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (2001), Rathunde argues that James, along with John Dewey and Abraham Maslow, initiated early "experiential turns" in American psychology toward "immediate subjective experience, to explore questions about what makes life fulfilling and meaningful" (p. 135). Indeed, in *Varieties* James writes, "If we were to ask the question: 'What is human life's chief concern?' one of the answers we should receive would be: 'It is happiness.' How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness, is in fact for most men at all times the secret motive of all they do, and of all they are willing to endure" (James 1902/2002, p. 66).

Elsewhere in *Varieties*, James offers interview and biographical data to support his arguments concerning the nature of peak experiences. For instance, he argues that one characteristic of the religious conversion experience is the "ecstasy of the happiness produced" (p. 199). One convert writes of this moment:

All my feelings seemed to rise and flow out; and the utterance of my heart was, I want to pour my whole soul out to God. The rising of my soul was so great... I must have continued in this state for a good while; but my mind was too much absorbed with the interview to recollect anything I said. But I know, as soon as my mind became calm enough to break off from the interview, I returned to the front office, and found that the fire that I had made of large wood was nearly burned out. (James 1902/2002, p. 199)

Another excerpt of biographical material recounted by James offers a similar perspective:

I remember the night, and almost the very spot on the hill-top, where my soul opened out, as it were, into the Infinite, and there was a rushing together of two worlds, the inner and the outer. It was a deep calling.... The ordinary sense of things around me faded. For the moment nothing but an ineffable joy and exaltation remained. It is impossible to fully describe the experience. It was like the effect of some great orchestra when all the separate notes have melted into one swelling harmony that leaves the listener conscious of nothing save that his soul is being wafted upwards, and almost bursting with its own emotion. (James 1902/2002, p. 56)

James's interest in peak subjective experience is certainly shared by present-day proponents of positive psychology. Positive psychologists such as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi have aimed to be as objective as possible in studying subjective mental states and have studied consciousness using sophisticated statistical analysis and palmtop computers or pagers programmed to "beep" at random moments throughout a week. At each beep of the computer or pager, the research participant fills out a brief questionnaire about their thoughts, feelings, and general mental states. Using such methods, known as the Experience Sampling Method (ESM), Csikszentmihalyi and colleagues have identified a peak mental state known as "flow" (1991), which relates to numerous positive life outcomes including creativity (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi and Rich 1997) and work motivation (Schmidt and Rich 2000). Work on optimism by Chris Peterson (2000) and positive illusions by Shelley Taylor (Rich 2000a; Taylor 1989) indicate that the present day field of health psychology is one legacy of James's vision and has much to offer an integrative positive psychology. Contemporary work in health psychology owes as much to James's views of healthy-mindedness as it does to the work on flow and optimal peak states.

### Csikszentmihalyi and the Flow Experience

Csikszentmihalyi (1996) describes the elements of the flow experience, which his research program has derived from qualitative interview data as well as from thousands of questionnaire reports of subjective experience via the Experience Sampling Method (ESM). He argues that a classic flow experience has nine main elements and that the description of the flow experience does not “vary much by culture, gender, or age” (Csikszentmihalyi 1996, p. 110). He notes that “old and young, rich and poor, men and women, Americans and Japanese seem to experience enjoyment in the same way, even though they may be doing very different things to attain it” (Csikszentmihalyi 1996, p. 111). The steps include: clear goals every step of the way, immediate feedback to one’s actions, a balance between challenges and skills, a merging of action and awareness, removal of distractions from consciousness, no worry of failure, self-consciousness disappears, the sense of time distorts, and finally, the activity becomes autotelic [a self-contained activity, not done with the expectation of future benefit] (Csikszentmihalyi 1996, p. 113).

### Comparison of the Elements of Flow and Mystical Experience

Csikszentmihalyi is clearly heir to James in the effort to make sense of peak experience via delineating the components of the experience. For example, near the end of *Varieties*, note that James makes an effort to dissect mystical experience into four component parts, ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity (James 1902/2002, p. 295). By transiency, James clarifies that he means the experience cannot be sustained for a long time, and typically lasts only one half hour or an hour or two (James 1902/2002, p. 295). By passivity, James writes that the “mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed as if he were grasped and held by a superior power” (James 1902/2002, p. 295). There are several noteworthy parallels between James’s analysis of mystical experience and Csikszentmihalyi’s research on flow. For instance, James’s notion of passivity seems to match rather closely Csikszentmihalyi’s research indicating that self-consciousness disappears, there is no sense of worry, and action and awareness are merged. Csikszentmihalyi’s research participants also seem to report that their flow experiences, like James’s descriptions of mystical experiences, are transient. One reason may be that flow requires a delicate balance of challenges of skills that is difficult to maintain for an extended period of time. If challenges exceed skills, the person becomes anxious. If skills exceed challenges, the person becomes bored (Csikszentmihalyi 1991). In terms of ineffability, a number of participants in Csikszentmihalyi’s studies (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi & Rich 1997) found it difficult to find words to describe their peak experiences. Finally, James notes that an element of the mystical experience is “noetic quality,” a quality that many of the participants in Csikszentmihalyi’s study of eminent creative people also reported. James notes that “although so similar

to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth... they are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance” (James 1902/2002, p. 295). Many of Csikszentmihalyi’s creators (1996) reported that their flow experiences led them to important creative insights in music, art, literature, and science. The nearly one hundred participants in this study included numerous Nobel, Pulitzer, and Grammy award winners.

### Example: James and Csikszentmihalyi on Music

An instructive comparison may be made by examining biographical/interview data from James and Csikszentmihalyi on peak states and music. In his chapter on conversion, James (1902/2002) recounts interview data of a mystical experience:

I had been clearly converted twenty-three years before, or rather reclaimed. My experience in regeneration was then clear and spiritual.... I experienced entire sanctification.... I was quietly sitting at home singing selections out of Pentecostal Hymns. Suddenly there seemed to be a something sweeping into me and inflating my entire being such a sensation as I had never experienced before. (James 1902/2002, p. 198)

In interviews with Rich (Csikszentmihalyi & Rich 1997), several eminent musicians relate peak experiences that seem eerily similar to the mystical experiences described by James. Oscar Peterson, the eminent Canadian jazz pianist and Grammy award winner, offered his sense of how he feels when he is enjoying playing:

Ecstasy!...sheer ecstasy. Because when you get something to the point where you can really execute it with all the emotion and intent that you feel within you, and you can project that, it’s pure happiness. At least to me it is... Because I think we are reborn when we play. I think when that happens, there’s an enlightenment that takes place. (Csikszentmihalyi & Rich, p. 61)

Ravi Shankar, the eminent maestro of the classical Indian sitar noted:

I am a very committed person when I perform. I know that I must try my best and be attuned in a way that I can give my best. And then I let myself go.... It takes a little time, some time...sometimes from the very first stroke I feel it is there. And then I let myself go.... And that is the best moment or rather when the best thing comes out of me. (Csikszentmihalyi & Rich, p. 61)

In addition to fitting Csikszentmihalyi’s criteria, Shankar and Peterson seem to fit some of the criteria for peak experiences according to James as well. For instance, Shankar is sensitive to the fact that one may enter or leave a flow state. Such a sense fits James’s criterion of tran-

sciency. The quest for linguistic superlatives in the excerpts from the musicians fits James's ineffability criterion. Shankar's sense of abandoning himself to the music fits James's criterion of passivity. Finally, elsewhere in the transcripts from the musicians, Shankar and Peterson discuss how the flow experience enhances and enriches their music and in fact leads to the production of new creative work. Such insights seem to be in line with James's criterion that mystical experience should have a noetic quality.

In sum, the approach to mystical experience by James and the approach to flow experience by Csikszentmihalyi have much in common. Both scholars are interested in similar, probably conceptually overlapping phenomena, and both scholars use biographies and interviews as data from which to develop a schema of the elements involved in the subjective experience. Indeed Eugene Taylor writes that William James is "America's first positive psychologist" (Taylor 2001, p. 17). Perhaps many of the differences between Csikszentmihalyi and James can be attributed to the state of research methods at the turn of the century. Csikszentmihalyi, as noted earlier, in addition to the qualitative interview data, employs sophisticated statistical methods known as the Experience Sampling Method. Indeed some of the work on hedonic experience by recent Nobel Laureate in Economics, Daniel Kahneman (2003), also employs a similar method. Ironically, a historical connection in quantitative method can be drawn between Csikszentmihalyi and James, through James's student G. Stanley Hall (1893) who pioneered questionnaire methods during the child study movement early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Techniques of Ecstasy: Achieving Flow and Mystical Experience

It is clear that in terms of valuing the importance of the topic of happiness and in terms of his developing a schema to help understand mystical, peak experience, James is a clear precursor to the present day positive psychology movement. Yet his *Varieties* also discusses another important topic of relevance to present day positive psychologists. Positive peak states exist, so how are such optimal states of consciousness to be achieved? Ample evidence suggests that for centuries if not millennia, humans have yearned for ecstatic, mystical, peak states of consciousness and have attempted to develop methods for increasing the likelihood of achieving such states. For instance, the great historian of religions Mircea Eliade (1964) detailed numerous of these "archaic techniques of ecstasy" in his classic cross-cultural studies of shamanism. Eliade, for example, found the use of rhythmic breathing, yoga, meditation, visualization, dreaming, and psychoactive drugs, was common among shamans.

Like Eliade, James mentions practices including passive relaxation, meditation, concentration, yoga, and hypnosis (Pawelski 2003). Famously, James experimented himself with mind-altering psychoactive substances including nitrous oxide (James 1902/2002). Today, many of these techniques are still used in some version and many of these techniques have modern scientific support for at

least some efficacy for at least some conditions. The "psychology of consciousness" course is taught in a number of psychology departments, and most introductory psychology textbooks have one chapter devoted to consciousness (e.g., Westen 2002). For instance, Farthing's (1992) text on the psychology of consciousness includes chapters on topics including sleep, dreaming, hypnosis, meditation, psychedelic drugs, the mind-body problem, split-brain research, and introspection. Ironically, in *Varieties* (1902/2002), James writes that "the expression 'field of consciousness' has but recently come into vogue in the psychology books" (p. 181). As James notes, "psychologists are tending, first, to admit that the actual unit [of consciousness] is more probably the total mental state, the entire wave of consciousness or field of objects present to thought at any time; and second, to see that it is impossible to outline this wave, this field, with any definiteness" (James 1902/2002, p. 181). Of course, Csikszentmihalyi's Experience Sampling Method and its multiple statistical reports of subjective experience attempts to do just this; outline the stream of consciousness in an empirical fashion. The daily-pager diary ESM appears to be an effective measure of the five higher-order characteristics of consciousness described by James in *The Principles of Psychology* (Farthing 1992, pp. 25-28), subjectivity, change, continuity, intentionality, and selectivity. Of course, for continuous monitoring of streams of consciousness, more frequent paging would be required, and perhaps continuous moment-to-moment paging will not be achieved for technical reasons or simply because participants in research studies would not want to carry ESM materials twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

As noted above, like Eliade, James mentions techniques for achieving mystical experiences including passive relaxation, meditation, concentration, yoga, and hypnosis (Pawelski 2003). These techniques are certainly part of the arsenal of treatments available to present day psychotherapists. In addition to the medications and talk therapy so prevalent and often effective in treatment for psychological disorders today (Seligman 1994), many psychologists, particularly health psychologists and medical doctors interested in behavioral medicine employ these techniques described by James. Of course, the psychotherapists are recommending them primarily for relaxation and stress and anxiety reduction rather than for induction of mystical or spiritual experience.

#### The Relaxation Response and Meditation

Quantitative and biological work on the relaxation response by Herbert Benson (1975) and on meditation by Richard Davidson (Goleman 2003) has become increasingly common and increasingly sophisticated. Remarkably, the present research seems to offer biopsychological, quantitative evidence in support of the qualitative, anecdotal, biographical and interview data recounted by James (2002). The "lama in the lab" studies of meditation reviewed by Goleman (2003), for example, combine the scientific precision of modern brain imaging technology

with the ecological validity of using meditating lamas as research subjects. Wallace and Benson (1972) studied TM meditators and found reduced respiration rate and volume of air breathed, reduced oxygen consumption and reduced energy metabolism. Heart rate and skin conductance decreased and alpha brain waves increased. All such factors point to reduced physiological arousal (Farthing 1992). While the data are not without critics—Holmes (1987), for example, argues that the data for meditation is not significantly different from the data for resting—the scholarly debate clearly owes much to the pioneering attention brought to yoga and meditation by William James, a scholar working in an era before cultural psychology was in vogue. One methodological critique of many of the early modern studies of meditation was that they did not use expert or even experienced meditators as research participants. Goleman and Davidson's (2002) work with experienced meditators is a positive step in correcting this methodological shortcoming.

### Hypnosis, Positive Psychology, and James

James also discussed hypnosis in *Varieties*. In a passage exploring the existence and nature of levels of deeper consciousness, James sounds almost Freudian when he discusses the use of hypnosis by Binet, Janet, Breuer, Freud, and others to explore "subliminal consciousness" (James 1902/2002, p. 184). As James notes, the clinical records of such sessions "sound like fairy-tales when one first reads them, yet it is impossible to doubt their accuracy" (James 1902/2002, p. 184). He seems especially intrigued by reports of post-hypnotic suggestion to rid a patient of hallucinations and pains. Of course, hypnosis has a long and controversial history in psychiatry and psychology, dating back at least to the controversy over Mesmer, mesmerism, and animal magnetism. Nevertheless, presently the American Psychological Association does have a section devoted to hypnosis and the technique is taught to some clinicians in some programs, in a manner that carefully distances itself from comedic or unethical stage hypnosis or frightening Hollywood-style depictions such as is seen in *The Manchurian Candidate*.

Modern hypnosis has developed sophisticated measures of susceptibility to hypnosis (Farthing 1992) and has carefully delineated various types of hypnotic suggestion and their efficacy. Some modern studies have indicated some efficacy for some patients with regard to pain, asthma, and smoking (Farthing 1992). Other research in the second half of the twentieth century has explored hypnosis as a tool for analgesia and the existence of posthypnotic amnesia. The results are indicating some efficacy though concerns continue to be raised regarding the mechanism underlying reported effects (Farthing 1992). Again, James's early mentions of hypnosis as a method by which one might explore deeper layers of consciousness, and his mentions of hypnosis as a remarkable potential tool for therapy, point to developments later in the century in psychology. While it is clear that the hypnotic state is quite different from the mystical state described by James

and the flow state described by Csikszentmihalyi, future researchers may wish to design studies (perhaps physiological) which make explicit comparisons between the subjective experience of hypnosis and the subjective experience of being in a peak, optimal mental state such as flow (or what James called a mystical state). Such studies would seem to fulfill the research agenda outlined by James in *Varieties*.

### Psychoactive Substances

Aside from meditation, yoga, and hypnosis, elsewhere in *Varieties*, James mentions the use of psychoactive substances to achieve peak or mystical states of consciousness. For instance, James (1902/2002) writes of the "chromatic hallucinations produced by the intoxicant cactus buds called mescal by the Mexicans" (p. 198). Elsewhere he notes:

nitrous oxide and ether, especially nitrous oxide,...stimulate the mystical consciousness in an extraordinary degree. Depth beyond depth of truth seems revealed to the inhaler. This truth fades out, however, or escapes, at the moment of coming to...nevertheless the sense of a profound meaning having been there persists; and I know more than one person who is persuaded that in the nitrous oxide trance we have a genuine metaphysical revelation.... Some years ago I myself made some observations on this aspect of nitrous oxide intoxication. (James 1902/2002, p. 300)

In the decades since James wrote these words, work on psychoactive drugs while controversial, due to legal restrictions and addiction issues, has also examined the use of such substances as a tool for reaching peak, mystical or optimal states of awareness. Some empirical work reviewed by scholars of religion such as Huston Smith (2001), psychologists such as Tom Roberts (2002), and anthropologists such as Joseph Calabrese (2001) hints at potential contemporary use of substances such as the hallucinogen peyote as a technology for achieving peak, mystical, spiritual states. The use of psychoactive substances in indigenous healing practices is a popular topic among anthropologists and social scientists of the twentieth century. For instance, peyote use in religious ceremony is examined in books by Weston La Barre (1959), and Barbara Myeroff (1974). Richard Katz (1983) studied the use of *yaqona* (kava) in Fijian healing. Harvard medical doctor David Eisenberg (1993) reported that one in three Americans now use some form of alternative healthcare, often an expense not reimbursed by health insurance. Much of this alternative healthcare consists of herbal remedies, including medical marijuana, of the sort discussed in books such as *The Natural Mind* (1986), by Harvard trained medical doctor, botanist, and popular health guru Andrew Weil. One senses that James would be interested in applying his research program to study the effects on consciousness and mystical experience of such substances.

Are positive psychologists interested in psychoactive substances? Clearly if by psychoactive substances one

means “street drugs,” such as cocaine and marijuana, there are skeptics in positive psychology. In *Authentic Happiness*, Seligman (2002) has several entries describing the dangers of substance abuse and techniques for how positive psychology prevention programs may alleviate this social problem. In a chapter entitled, “happiness in the present,” Seligman (2002) distinguishes between basic “raw feel” “pleasures” that have a “clear sensory and strong emotional component,” and “gratifications,” which are enjoyable but may not be accompanied by raw feeling (p. 102). Gratifications may include thinking activities such as reading a great book or having a good conversation. A high from cocaine or marijuana would appear to neatly fit Seligman’s pleasure category (at least at first; later addiction and its tragic consequences may follow). Elsewhere, Seligman describes the “myriad shortcuts to feeling good” invented through the years, including “drugs, chocolate, loveless sex, shopping, masturbation, and television” (Seligman 2002, p. 8). In critiquing such “shortcuts to happiness,” Seligman warns that “positive emotion alienated from the exercise of character leads to emptiness, to inauthenticity, to depression” (Seligman 2002, p.8). He argues that these shortcuts to happiness may ultimately lead to “spiritual starvation.”

Similar to Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi (1991) makes a distinction between “pleasure” and “enjoyment” which indicates that enjoyment is the more sophisticated, deeper, and important dimension. Csikszentmihalyi’s arguments seem to indicate that drug use may offer a temporary psychological and physical pleasure but that this is a pleasure that will not grow or persist with continued use and in fact addiction is a far more likely outcome than enlightenment. According to the flow model, one reason street-drug use is unlikely to lead to continual flow experiences is that over time the balance of skills and challenges of the activity stagnate, such that more and more drug is needed for the same, now boring, outcome.

One apparent area of divergence between James and positive psychologists is that James was interested in studying drug-induced peak states, while most positive psychologists seem to have little interest in such states. Is this lack of interest among positive psychologists an advance, or is it simply a bias? Should positive psychologists be more interested in exploring ways in which drugs (including prescription medications) may promote psychological well-being?

### Recent Developments in Psychology

Finally, one indication of the lasting legacy of James for studies of consciousness is the publication of *Varieties of Anomalous Experience*, a recent book edited by several past presidents of the APA hypnosis division and published by the American Psychological Association. The book pays homage to William James not only in the title of the book, but in terms of the book’s contents and empirical methods (Cardena, Lynn, & Krippner 2000). For instance, the editors aim to study controversial topics with the most precise methods available. Topics include hypnosis, mysti-

cal states, and anomalous healing experiences. While some very good work in positive psychology has examined the role of religious participation on health and coping (e.g. Emmons 1999; Pargament 1997), work at the University of Pennsylvania by the late Eugene d’Aquili and his colleague Andrew Newberg (2001) might especially resonate with the James of *Varieties*, in that Newberg and d’Aquili are especially interested in the neurology of transcendent, spiritual states of consciousness. In fact, Newberg and d’Aquili have termed their research “neurotheology.” Likewise, the eminent neurologist Antonio Damasio certainly agrees that the methods of cognitive neuroscience, and the resulting studies of brain sections and neurotransmitters, may lead to insights into positive affective experience (Rich 2000b).

### Conclusion

With so much evidence to suggest that James’s interests and explorations in peak mental states have influence and importance for the present day scientific psychology of consciousness, are there any important differences between the psychology of consciousness and positive psychology? Perhaps a primary difference is the focus on the temporary alteration of subjective states of consciousness (both positive and negative) in the field of the psychology of consciousness studies in comparison to a much broader focus in positive psychology. As Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) note, positive psychology is not only the “science of positive subjective experience” but the science of “positive individual traits, and positive institutions” as well (p. 5). The types of transitory bliss and peak experiences studied by James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, consciousness researchers, and positive psychologists may be part of the “good life,” but certainly these experiences do not represent the whole enterprise. Nevertheless, connections between James and positive psychologists, both in terms of content and method, are strong. As Pawelski (2003) notes, when James gave his presidential address to the American Philosophical Association nearly one hundred years ago in 1906, he called for the creation of a field of psychology to scientifically study and apply the principles of “mind-cure” and “healthy-mindedness.” While for decades psychologists have ignored the call, and have focused on human deficits such as the study of depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia, Seligman’s recent call for a positive psychology aims to re-center the field. The scientific study of techniques for altering consciousness towards peak experience represents one piece of this complex puzzle.

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